Aug. 27 Nine Varied Action Stories

ARGOSY

WEEKLY

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By W. C. Tuttle

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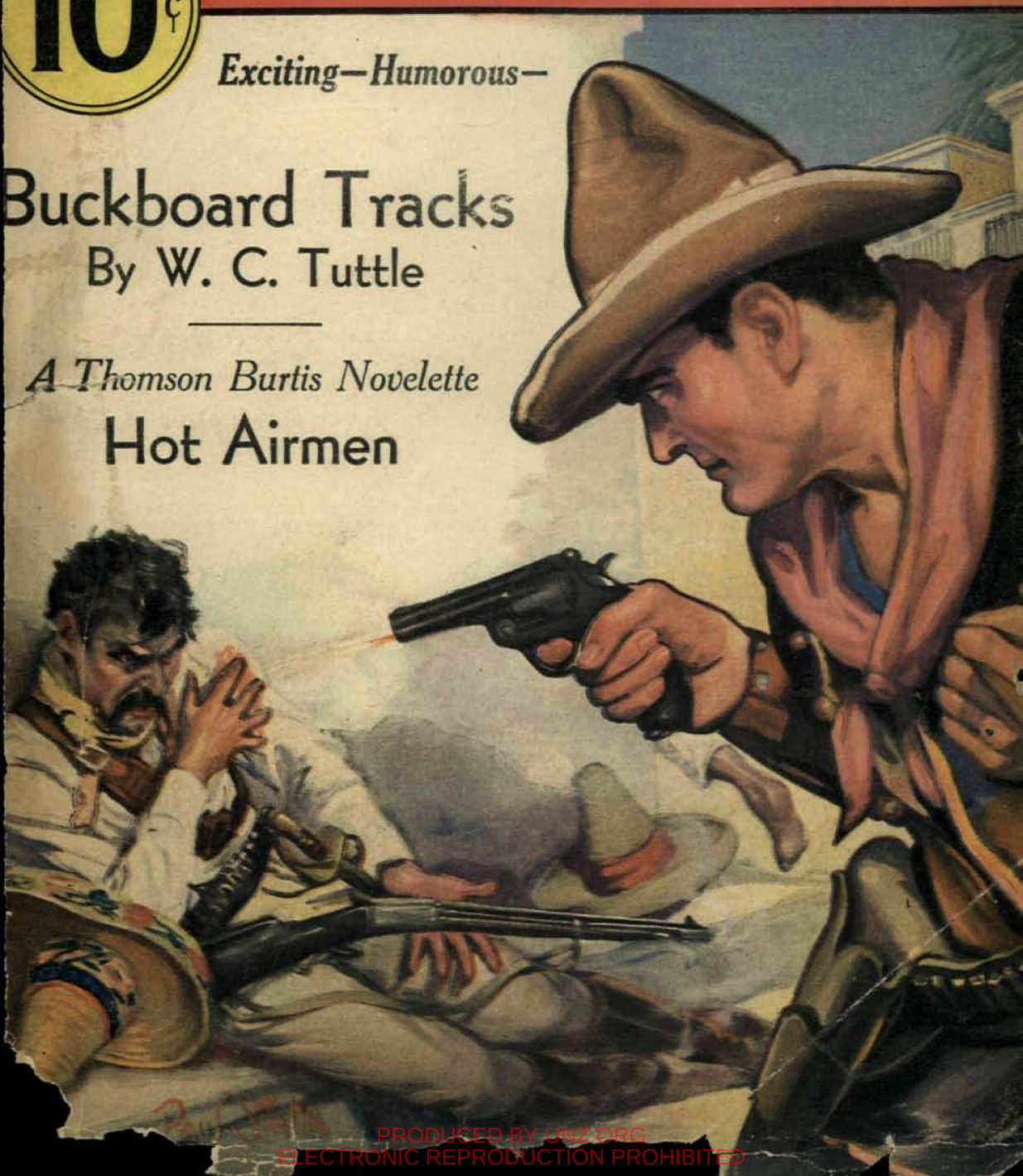
Hot Airmen



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one day, a strange occurrence changed his whole During his lunch hour Ed started to read a little he had brought to work with him.

's a book called 'The Key To Master Salesman- Bill," he told me. "It's the most amazing thing er read. I never dreamed there was so much in manship. You ought to send for a copy yourself. ree."

h!" said Luke Jones. "Does that book tell you how me a salesman?"

re does," replied Ed, enthusiastically.

t waste your time," advised Luke. "You can't w to be a salesman. A fellow has to be 'born' to be a good salesman."

iled at that, but he said nothing. Soon after- the shop, and we forgot about him. And then net Ed again—driving a snappy new sedan ke a million dollars.

sake," I said. "What are you doing now- He smiled. "City sales manager for the gs Company," he told me. "What are you

at the shop," I replied. "But what I want to is, how do you come to be sales manager for Steel ings? They're one of the biggest firms in the ess."

smiled again. "Remember that book on Salesman- that Luke Jones was kidding me about one day? when I finished my salesmanship training the As- ion I took it from gave me a choice of a number of through their Free Employment Department. I got nderful job, and I had wonderful training, so I've a pretty successful time of it. They made me City Manager three months ago at ten thousand dollars ar."

ood night!" I said. "And Luke and I are still ing the old time clock!"

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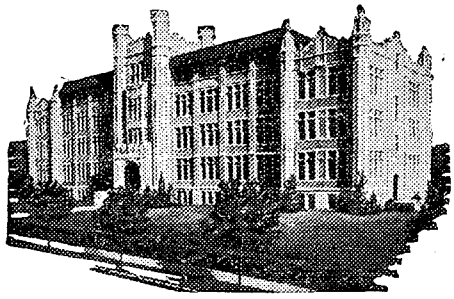

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ARGOSY

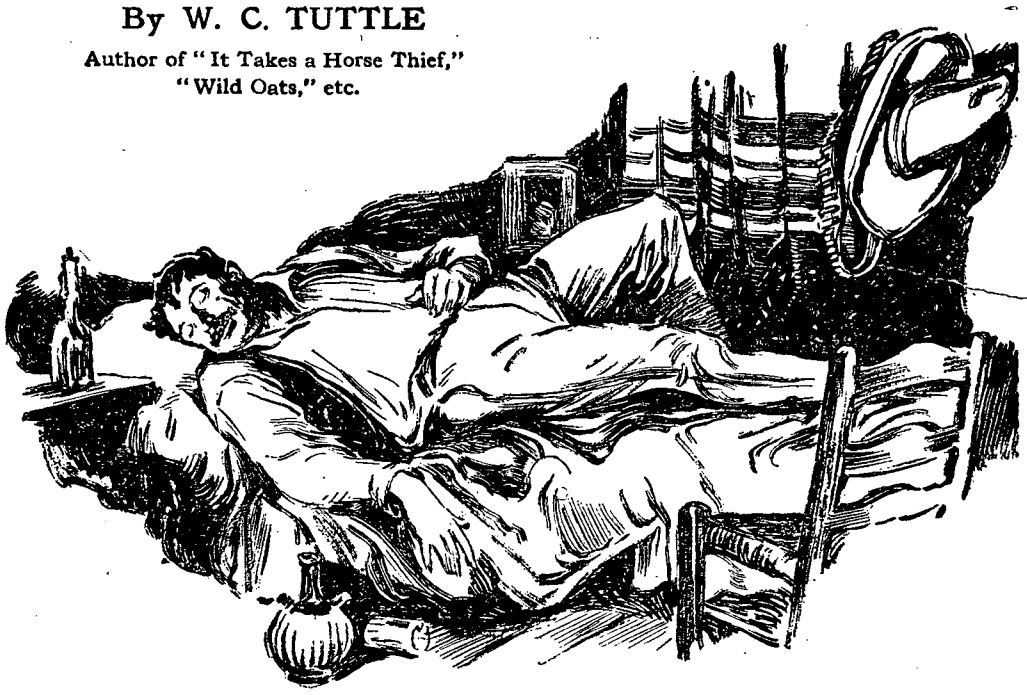
VOLUME 232 SATURDAY, AUGUST 27, 1932 NUMBER 2

Buckboard Tracks

"I," said Irish O'Shea's Mexican captor, "am the best dreenker in Mexico—and the best shooter. I weel show you—"

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "It Takes a Horse Thief," "Wild Oats," etc.



CHAPTER I.

OVER THE BORDER.

OF course, there should have been a sign or a fence, or something to show Irish O'Shea that he was crossing the border into Mexico. Not that it would have made any material difference to O'Shea, except, possibly, to have made him more cautious. But there was nothing to indicate that he had ridden out of Arizona; nothing but rocks and sage, with an occasional clump of mesquite, ocotillo and scattered Joshua palms.

Irish O'Shea was the young foreman of the Seven Cut cattle outfit, near

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Ocotillo City, forty miles away; and Irish was looking for thirty head of young horses which had been spirited away from the Seven Cut. Irish was twenty-five years of age, dark as an Indian, with black hair and brown eyes. Black Irish, fighting Irish, was O'Shea, with a flashing, white-toothed smile, built like a middleweight fighter, and rated the best broncho rider in that part of the State.

Perhaps Irish O'Shea was a bit gaudy in his cowboy garb; but he looked well in silver and bright colors. He rode a black gelding, and his riding rig was of black leather, trimmed in carved silver. Irish had his bat-wing chaps cut a bit wider than regular, the conchas were of a distinctive design; and the five on each leg of his chaps represented two months' salary.

Irish was riding south, singing softly, when he suddenly found himself surrounded by mounted Mexicans. They appeared to be a company of *rurales,* mounted Mexican police, but Irish knew that no *rurales* were stationed in that part of the country. They were covering him with rifles before he realized what was being done.

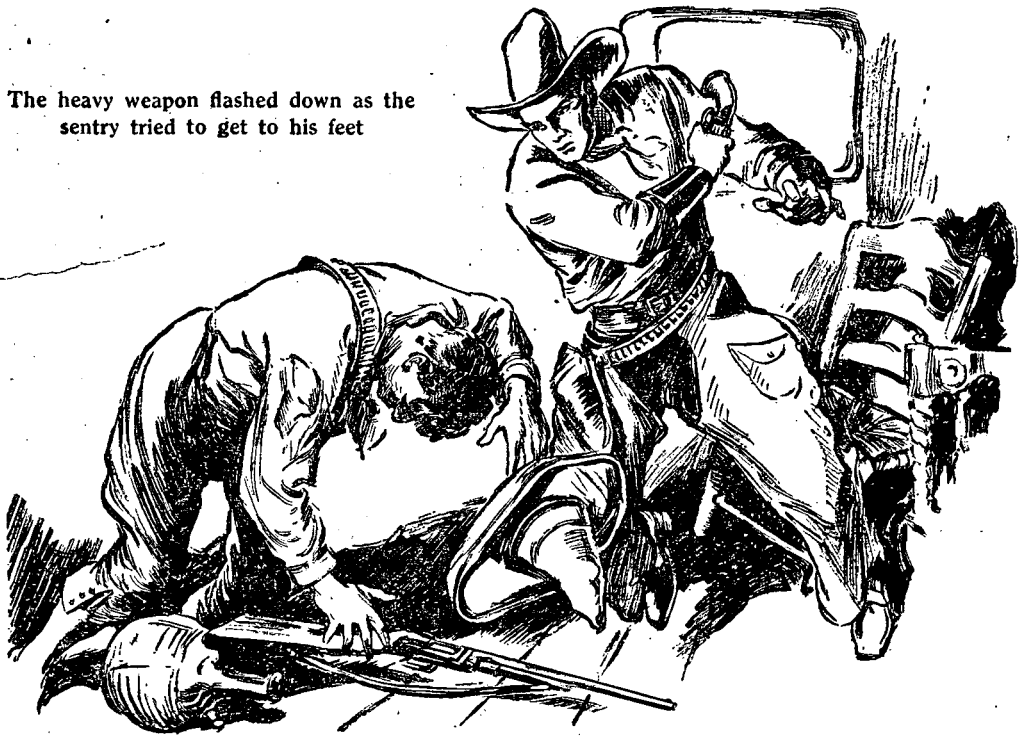
"*Buenas dias, señor,*" grinned a short, fat Mexican, whose mustaches should have belonged to a Chinese mandarin. He spurred in closer and removed Irish's gun from its holster.

"*Gracias,*" he chuckled.

"Talk English, you bug-headed chili," said Irish. "And tell these ignorant 'dobie-ites to ease off on them triggers. You've got my gun."

"You theenk thees ees fonny?" asked the spokesman.

"Well, I dunno," replied Irish, looking them over. "They're funny



The heavy weapon flashed down as the sentry tried to get to his feet

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enough, if that's what you mean. But why stick me up?"

"Steek you up? *Idiota!* You are een Mejico. Don' you know that Americano *vaquero* got no beezness in Mejico carrying a gon?"

"Oh, is this Mexico?"

"*Si.*"

Irish eased himself in the saddle and looked back.

"Where's the line?" he asked.

"Too far back; you never find."

"Uh-huh." Irish turned and looked at his captors. "Well, I must say I've horned into the finest bunch of cutthroats I ever seen. What's yore name, feller?"

"Tito," replied the spokesman. "Tito. You onnerstand? Tito."

"Go write it on a rock and then shoot yourself," advised Irish.

Another undersized Mexican, skinny as a lizard, spurred in close.

"Thees Tito ees my brodder," he said proudly. "I am brodder from heem, too."

"That makes it complicated," said Irish. "Both named Tito?"

"My name ees Poco. He ees my brodder and I am brodder from heem."

"Now, that makes it nice," said Irish seriously. "I'm glad yuh told me. How about givin' me back my gun?"

"No," replied Tito quickly. "Thees gon not come back to you. Now we take you see the general. Poco, you put rope on thees 'orse."

"Where is this general?" asked Irish.

"Santa Juana. Thees ees General Pedro Morales."

"Morales, eh? How does he rate a general's commission? The last time I seen him, he was beatin' it out of Nogales jist ahead of a bunch of Federal soldiers."

"Morales ees ver' good frand from thees Gov'nor."

"Oh, yeah. What kind of an army has he got at Santa Juana?"

"You see mos' of thees army now."

Irish wanted to laugh, but he realized he was in a bad position. He knew Morales as an unprincipled Mexican rogue; two hundred and fifty pounds of oily ignorance; an egotistical hulk, who gloried in plotting against the government. A political pull, probably through a division of graft, possibly through relationship, had reinstated him after his last ill-fated connection with a revolution, and he was at Santa Juana, commanding officer of these ragamuffin soldiers.

Irish was not ignorant of what Morales could do to him for being armed in Mexico. The penalty could be what Morales wished. Santa Juana was an isolated little village, a mile from the border, and on the American side was only a little revenue office and a store.

Irish had never been in Santa Juana, but he knew that its reputation was bad. The border officers cursed the place and swore it was a nest of smugglers. But they could do nothing.

THE cavalcade rode into Santa Juana, a huddle of adobe houses, most of them strung along the one street, none bigger than two stories, and most of them a dirty white. Wooden balconies jutted out over the street, which was deep in dust. There were no sidewalks in Santa Juana.

Few people noticed the American cowboy in the midst of the soldiers, as they traveled the length of the street, fogging the whole town with dust from the horses' hoofs.

They drew up in front of a two-story adobe, which boasted a rickety

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porch, where a sentry waited for them. This man wore a dirty undershirt, an old pair of riding pants, unlaced at the bottoms, and no shoes. His Mauser looked businesslike, however. His challenge was a wide yawn, and he showed little interest in Irish.

Most of the army dismounted, pointing their rifles at Irish, who headed for the door, with Tito and Poco close behind. The room was large and poorly furnished. On a rickety bed lay General Morales, half-dressed, snoring loudly. On the floor beside the bed was a gallon demijohn, uncorked, around the neck of which buzzed a cloud of flies.

Tito dropped the butt of his rifle to the floor, and the thud caused the general's siesta to break off short. That is, it caused him to open one eye. The other one opened gradually. Then he yawned heavily, put both hands under himself, and after considerable effort managed to assume a sitting position.

Morales had not been on a diet since Irish had seen him last. Possibly he was twenty-five pounds heavier. Morales had a face like a full moon, on which grew whiskers in a haphazard manner. For instance, one side of his mustache was fairly regular, but the other side had all the appearance of having been left to the moths. His hair was not exactly his crowning glory; it was a greasy mat, with one lock sticking straight out to the front.

Another yawn made him fully awake; so he shut one eye and looked closely at Irish, who returned the scrutiny.

"Hyah, Pete," said Irish. "My Gawd, man, yo're gettin' fat!"

The general made guttural noises in his thick throat, shifted his position, which caused the bed to groan complainingly, brushed some of the flies away from his supply of *tequila* and drew the demijohn up beside him on the bed. He looked at Tito, who explained in Spanish what had happened and why he brought a prisoner.

Irish could understand and speak Spanish well enough to get along, but he paid no attention to Tito's explanation. Morales took a deep drink, pulled the jug in close beside him and looked appraisingly at Irish O'Shea.

"W'at the hell you do down 'ere, anyway?" he asked.

"I didn't know I was across the border," replied Irish.

"No-o-o? You prob'ly lie to me, eh?"

"I didn't lie to yuh. Tell that bat-eared spig over there to give me back my gun, and I'll be pullin' out."

"So? You theenk you can breeng gon down 'ere? *Por Dios,* you are beeg damn fool. I am ron theese place—me, General Morales. Who you theenk you are, eh? Geeve me back my gon! Tak' off 'at! W'at the hell you theenk, eh? Now w'at the hell you do down 'ere?"

"Go lay an egg, you fat-headed *ladron!*" snapped Irish.

"You call me *ladron?*" choked Morales. "You say I am thief?"

"You never made an honest dollar in yore life."

MORALES, puffing exceedingly, his face scarlet, searched around among the tumbled blankets. Apparently he was searching for his gun, but was unable to find it. Finally he decided that the effort was too much, and looked at Irish O'Shea malevolently.

"You'll git mad some day and have a stroke," said Irish. "A feller as fat as you are hadn't ort to never git mad."

Morales sighed and ran a fat finger

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into the mouth of his jug. He turned to Poco and ordered him to produce the gun he had taken from Irish. Poco gave it up reluctantly, because it was a good gun. Morales cocked it carefully, placed it on his lap and ordered Tito to take his army out of the place.

"But the prisoner, general," protested Tito.

"Are you giving me orders?" roared the general. "Take them away!"

Tito reformed his army and marched them out to the horses, which they led away. The barefooted sentry looked into the room, got a dirty look from the general, and resumed his shuffling on the porch.

"I'm ron thees place," declared the general. "You don't theenk so, eh?"

"Yeah, I reckon yuh do," admitted Irish. He knew that six-shooter was easy on the trigger.

"I am bigges' man een Santa Juana, eh?"

"Yeah, I reckon yuh are, general."

"I am bes' damn shot in thees Mejicano army."

"Well," replied Irish, "I've got to take yore word for that."

"You wan' dreenk liquor?"

"All right," agreed Irish.

"Go to hell; I dreenk my own liquor. Seet down and watch me dreenk."

"I'll bet yo're the best drinker in the Mexican army, too," said Irish.

"Sure," agreed Morales, as he wiped off his mustaches. He placed the jug beside him again and examined the cocked gun.

"Thees good gon," he said. "I keep for myself personally. You wan' see me shoot?"

"It all depends on what yuh shoot at," replied Irish.

"*Bueno.*"

Morales got to his feet and lurched over to the doorway, where he steadied himself against the wall. Irish came in close to him, wondering what Morales would use for a target. A couple of half-starved curs were taking a siesta in the shade across the street, when the general fired a shot in their direction. The bullet smashed into the adobe wall of a small market twenty feet wide of the target, but the two dogs went away from there in a cloud of dust.

Morales laughed with drunken glee, and sent a bullet straight down the main street of the town. The sentry laughed heartily.

"You keel both from them," he said. "Keel both, one shot."

"Damn right," choked the fat general. "I am fine shot."

"Yo're a damn fool along with it," said Irish. "You'll kill somebody's kid down there, if yuh ain't careful."

"Huh!" Morales looked owlishly at Irish. "You theenk you can shoot?"

"Yeah, I can shoot—a little."

"*Bueno!* We shoot. But firs' I take dreenk."

Morales left Irish at the doorway, while he went back to the bed and drank deeply from his jug. The sentry came in close to Irish.

"No beat heem shoot," warned the sentry. "He get ver' mad."

"All right, pardner," replied Irish. Morales came back and sat down on the doorstep. Irish hunched down beside him. Across the street was a vacant lot, littered with tin cans, and as Morales lifted the gun to shoot at one of them, the army came back, attracted by the shooting. The general paid no attention to them. He fired at one of the cans, but his drunken aim was bad, and a hunk of adobe flew from the wall at the rear of the lot.

"Viva Morales!" applauded Tito, and the rest of the army cheered weak-

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ly. Irish understood perfectly — the king was always the best.

Morales gave the gun to Irish, who took careful aim and almost missed the wall entirely.

"I reckon you beat me," admitted Irish.

"Sure," agreed Morales. "I am bes' damn shot in worl'. Look thees one."

That shot actually hit a tin can, but at least twenty feet away from the one he fired at.

"That shot was perfec'!" declared Morales. "Nobody can beat. You like try, greengo?"

"I can't beat that one, general."

"We 'ave dreenk now, eh?"

He started to get to his feet, and Tito essayed to help him, but he kicked Tito's feet from under him and Tito fell off the porch.

"Tak' damn army away from 'ere!" roared the general. "You theenk I'm need you for help? Go 'way—I'm don't like your face, *Vamose!*"

TITO led his soldiers away, while Morales, nearly apoplectic from the effort, managed to get to his feet. He staggered back to the bed, but clung to the revolver. The bed creaked and groaned, but somehow managed to hold together. Morales generously poured a drink into a tin cup for Irish, who abominated *tequila*. He managed to spill most of it on the floor, while Morales drank thirstily from the jug. The sentry watched from the front doorway.

Morales was not dangerous now. The effort of getting up from the steps and the potency of that last drink had been too much for him. He made a decided effort to keep his eyes open, grunted wearily and began snoring. Irish slumped back in his chair and considered the situation.

The sentry leaned against the doorway, watching Irish. Possibly he was afraid to come in and take the gun from Morales. The sun was down so low that the heavy shadows filled the street. As long as the sentry watched him there was no chance to recover that gun. Even with the gun, his chances of reaching the border were very slim indeed. He would have to kill the sentry, and go on foot out of Santa Juana. No, it did not look so good to Irish O'Shea. The room began to grow darker. There were candles on the table. Irish had plenty of patience. He felt sure that nothing would happen to him as long as Morales slept, because the general had not given any orders for his disposal.

It was dark in the room when Tito came. He spoke to the sentry, walked in and lighted two of the candles. He scowled at Irish, who seemed to be asleep in his chair. Tito was carrying a bowl of what smelled like food to Irish, who had not eaten since breakfast.

He walked over to a locked door, and the sentry came inside. Tito had one of the candles, and as he entered the other room Irish saw what seemed to be the lower half of a man, lying on the floor. It was only a flash in the candlelight, but it was his impression that the feet of the man were clad in cowboy boots.

Tito was gone about five minutes. He dropped the bar into place, but did not fasten the padlock.

"Why do you hurry?" asked the sentry in Spanish.

"A good game of draw poker," laughed Tito.

The sentry gave an exclamation of disgust at his hard luck in not being able to enter the game.

"The general is as drunk as a pig,

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and I alone am here to guard the prisoner. Shall we bind him safely?"

Apparently Tito enjoyed the discomfiture of the sentry.

"We have no orders to bind him. It is your duty to guard both the prisoner and the charming general."

Laughing at his own wit, Tito went shuffling away, while the sentry glowered after him, muttering threats to get even with Tito. A few moments later the general shifted heavily to his right side, and the revolver fell to the floor, between Irish and the bed.

Without thinking of the danger, the sentry hurried over and stooped to pick up the gun. It was no time for Irish O'Shea to remember the ethics of rough and tumble fighting. He was out of that chair like a flash, and his well directed kick brought an explosive grunt from the sentry. The next moment Irish had his gun, and as the sentry tried to get to his feet, the heavy weapon flashed down, and he went out.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECOND CAPTIVE.

IRISH jumped back, loosened some cartridges from his belt and quickly filled the cylinder of the .45. Morales slept noisily. Irish picked up a candle, stepped over and unbarred the door. A young cowboy, bound and gagged, looked up at the candlelight. Irish had never seen him before and had no idea why he was a captive, but he quickly untied the bonds and took away the dirty gag.

The cowboy grunted with pain, tried to get up, but sank back. Irish helped him up, and he gritted his teeth from the anguish of returning circulation. After a few moments he was able to hobble along with Irish. They left the candles burning. Irish picked up the sentry's rifle and gave it to the cowboy.

"It'll do as a crutch, anyway," said Irish.

"I pretty near need one, pardner," replied the cowboy painfully. "I've been tied up there two days. My name's Dusty Davis."

"Mine's Irish O'Shea. Dusty, I've been wonderin' if we better whip the army before we go."

"I'd like to do it. I wonder if we can find some horses."

"Do yuh know where the army might keep their rollin' stock?"

"Oh, sure; if yuh want to take that chance. They've got my bronc."

"Mine, too; and I'm not givin' up Diamond without a scrap. They've got my rig too. Lead on, will yuh?"

"C'mon."

It was quite dark, but Dusty knew Santa Juana. They plodded up a short street, crossed a vacant plot of ground and went through a scattered grove of pepper trees. Beyond this was the barracks, a long, low adobe. They could hear the voices of the soldiers.

"Playin' poker," said Irish. "I'll betcha they won't have no guards around the horses."

The stables consisted of a long shed and an open corral. There was a small storeroom, windowless and doorless, in which the Mexicans kept their saddles and bridles; and here the cowboys found both of their saddles. Diamond, Irish's black, came straight to him; but they had a little difficulty in finding Dusty's brown gelding.

Quickly they saddled and led their horses down to the deep shadows of the peppers.

"The hell of it is, we've got to ride down the main street," explained Dusty. "There's a deep *arroyo* on each side of the town. But we can

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make it easy. They've got two policemen who know me and my horse; and they know damn well I was a prisoner. But we'll ride slow-like down the street, and they probably won't pay no attention. If they do—I'll—well, I've been hankerin' to lead up both of 'em."

"That's great," chuckled Irish. "Let's go."

They swung into their saddles, walked their horses down to the main street, where they turned to the right. Santa Juana was unlighted, except for the shop windows. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the two cowboys, and they were nearly to the east end of the street when a knot of people in front of a store attracted them.

A girl seemed to be trying to get away from two men, who were dressed like a pair of Morales's soldiers, and as they swung around in the light Irish could see that it was a white girl.

"Good Lord!" snapped Dusty. "It's Norma! Why, what—?"

He spurred his horse almost into them, swinging up the rifle. The crowd scattered. One of the men let loose of the girl, and as she whirled around she tore the sleeve of her dress, leaving it in the hands of the other man.

"Norma! Here!" yelled Dusty. She ran to him and he dropped the rifle to pull her up on the horse.

One of the men jerked out a revolver, but Irish's bullet thudded into his shoulder, whirling him around and dropping him to a praying position against the wall. The other man ran swiftly up the street, calling for help, and the audience scattered like quail.

Dusty slid behind his saddle, swung the girl ahead of him, whirled his horse around, and they went racing out of Santa Juana. In a moment they were out of the street, pounding along a dusty road.

"If the Mexicans try to stop us at the border, ride 'em down," panted Dusty. "Don't take a chance—you downed a policeman."

BUT there was only one Mexican at their little revenue office. He was on the steps, and they showered him with gravel. He was still blinking it out of his eyes as they thundered up to the little office of the customs collector.

There was only one man on the American side; a hard-bitten individual with a wide, thin-lipped mouth and tired eyes. He looked them over curiously, studied the girl for several moments and smiled.

"Mebbe you'll believe me next time, when I tell yuh that Santa Juana ain't no place for a girl," he said. "And where the hell have you been for the past two days, Dusty?"

"I've been restin', all tied up," replied Dusty. "I'd still be there if Irish O'Shea hadn't showed up. Irish, meet Jim Boyle."

They shook hands solemnly.

"And what happened to you, Mister O'Shea?" asked Boyle.

Irish explained in a few words. Boyle shook his head sadly.

"Santa Juana is gettin' too tough. Yuh didn't have to kill anybody, did yuh?"

"Unless medical treatment ain't handy, I might be guilty," admitted Irish. "I socked a soldier over the head with my six-gun and I crippled the shoulder of a policeman with a bullet. But he was drawin' on us. I hope everythin' will be all right."

"Oh, them little things don't amount to anythin'. I'll have to tell this to the boys of the patrol; they'll enjoy it. Yuh see, they ain't allowed to go over there, but they do love to hear of somebody

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givin' them crooks a good curryin'. Santa Juana is a disgrace to Mexico."

"Morales is a pretty tough *hombre;* eh?" smiled Irish.

"Morales is only ignorant. He runs the army, such as it is. You should have met Li Wang and Pablo Ortez. They've got brains. Morales thinks he runs things, but he don't."

"Then Santa Juana ain't a one-man town, eh?"

"It ain't, O'Shea. Where are yuh goin' now?"

"We are going home," said the girl. "Mr. O'Shea is going with us. I've never met the gentleman yet, but I've heard his name."

"Excuse me, Norma," said Dusty quickly. "I'd like to have yuh meet Irish O'Shea. Irish, this here lady is Norma Austin."

Norma reached out her hand to Irish and they shook hands solemnly.

"We're on our way," said Dusty. "See yuh later, Boyle."

The officer grinned as they rode away. The girl was silent, and the two cowboys only exchanged a few words. In less than an hour they arrived at what seemed a sizeable cattle ranch.

"You are welcome to the Cross A, Mr. O'Shea," said the girl, and laughed throatily. "That rhymes, doesn't it? Dusty, you put up the horses, and both of you come up to the house; we've got to talk things over."

Dusty had nothing to say as they stabled their horses. He led the way up to the big ranch house, where they found the girl and four cowboys in the main room.

IT was the first time Irish had really seen Norma Austin. She was not exactly pretty, but Irish decided that she was mighty good to look at. Her eyes were big and dark, she had wavy, dark brown hair, and a clear, olive-tinted skin. She had gone through that episode in Santa Juana without showing any decided fear.

Dusty introduced Irish to the four cowboys, Johnny Link, Doc Smalley, Ollie Reed and Omaha Tozier.

"Where the hell you been at, Dusty?" asked Johnny Link, a little man whose face was full of grin-wrinkles. "We thought mebbe somebody had dry-gulched yuh."

"They did, jist about," admitted Dusty. "I rode into Santa Juana and the army fell on my neck. I dunno why. I asked the general what it was all about and he almost stove in all my ribs. That big brute can shore kick."

"Well, great lovely dove!" exclaimed Doc Smalley. "What is it all about, anyway? Norma, what was you doin' down in Santa Juana all alone, and have yuh heard anythin' of yore dad?"

Norma shook her head.

"I was over in Oro Springs this afternoon and a little Mexican kid came up to me. He couldn't talk English at all. He asked me where he could find Señorita Austin. He said that dad had been hurt down in Santa Juana; that he was in the Oriental Cantina. I don't believe the boy was lying; he seemed so anxious about it all."

"But you didn't find him?"

"It was after dark when I got down there," said Norma. "I got off my horse in front of the Oriental Cantina, and those policemen grabbed me. I went with them for a ways because I thought they were taking me to dad. Then I got the drift of their remarks. and it sounded very much as though I was on my way to jail. That was when I tried to get away, and then I saw Dusty and Mr. O'Shea."

"I tell yuh what we've got to do,"

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said Omaha. "We've got to jist go down there and mop up on that place. Here's six of us; and that's enough to do the job."

"We've got to find John Austin before we do anythin' else," said Dusty. "I want to pay Morales for that kick in the ribs, but that can wait until we find the boss."

"After what happened to-night," admitted Norma, "I'm really worried. Before this, we have always been safe in Santa Juana. I never thought anything about going down there alone. Li Wang and Pablo Ortez have both been here.

"General Morales hasn't, because he doesn't dare come across the border. Uncle Sam hasn't forgotten that Morales did a bit of raiding at one time."

"Ortez has taken enough money away from yore father," said Dusty. "He ain't got no cause to do yore dad any dirt."

Norma sighed wearily. "Poor dad; he will gamble."

"And lose," added Dusty.

"Yes, that is very true. Well, I suppose we may as well go to bed. Dusty, will you see that Mr. O'Shea is given a bed?"

"I'll see that he's given anythin' he wants," grinned Dusty. "If it hadn't been for him, I reckon things might have been pretty bad for both of us."

CHAPTER III.

DUSTY'S TALE.

THE Cross A ranch was one of the oldest places in that part of the State. Parts of the ranch house dated back to the original building used by Don Diego Ramirez, lord of thousands of acres, granted to him by the King of Spain. The old adobe rambled like a poorly drawn letter U, the center of which was a sycamore-shaded patio, its ancient tiles deeply worn. In the center of the patio was an open well, curbed high with flat stones.

One end of the U was the bunk house and the grain room, and down a slight slope, shaded by a number of gnarled sycamores, were the corrals and stables. Many of the old hand-made tiles were still in place on the ranch house roof, and some of the windows were still guarded by wrought-iron grilles brought from Spain.

Irish and Dusty slept late the next morning, and Norma sat with them in the cool adobe dining room while Old Maria, the Indian cook, served their breakfast. She was a short, fat, stolid-faced squaw, but an excellent cook withal.

"Maria is the only mother I remember," said Norma. The old squaw smiled at her and nodded violently.

"Ol' Maria pretty damn good modder, eh?" she said, and went shuffling into the kitchen.

"She always says that," smiled Norma. "She may be Indian, but she's wonderful. Her people have always worked here—as far back as she has ever known. I suppose they were here when Don Diego Ramirez came, and he gave them a job."

The two cowboys finished their breakfast, and Norma went with them to the shady patio.

"What are yuh figurin' on doin', Irish?" asked Dusty.

"Well, Dusty, about the only thing for me to do is to go back home and mark thirty two-year-olds off to complete loss. I know very well I'm not goin' horse huntin' down in Mexico again. Once is plenty for me."

"I don't blame yuh," replied

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Dusty. "I wish we didn't have to go down there again—but we've got to do it. Norma's father is down there somewhere, and we've got to find him. I didn't think so much about it until they decoyed Norma down there yesterday. I thought—well—"

"Go ahead, Dusty," said Norma. "You thought dad was down there gambling again."

"Well, it wasn't none of my business, Norma. If he wants to gamble, it ain't up to me to try and stop him."

"Let me git this all straight in my mind," said Irish. "Why would they harm Mr. Austin?"

"I haven't any idea," said Norma. "We don't know that they have."

Irish looked quizzically at Dusty for several moments.

"Dusty," he said, "why did they have you tied up and gagged?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do."

Irish scratched his nose thoughtfully.

"Didn't they tell yuh anythin'?"

Dusty sighed and shook his head. "Not a thing, Irish."

"And why on earth would they try to capture Miss Austin?"

"For no known reason," replied Norma. "They never told me what it was all about. That Mexican boy said that dad was sick or hurt."

"I've tried to puzzle it out," said Dusty, "but it beats me. Unless it was somethin' about what happened here a few nights ago."

"What was that?" asked Irish.

DUSTY got up from his seat and leaned against the curbing of the old well, a serious glint in his blue eyes.

"We had a young gun-battle here in the patio—me and another feller," said Dusty slowly.

"A gun battle, eh? Sounds interestin'. Anybody hurt?"

"Yeah," said Dusty softly. "I killed him."

"I'm going in and help Marie with the beds," said Norma. They watched her enter the house, and Dusty came over to sit close to Irish.

"Didja know the feller?" asked Irish.

"I never seen him before in my life. Irish, he was nothin' but a poor type of Mexican. I'll tell yuh how it was. The boys was all over at Oro Springs, and so was John Austin. A horse fell with me that day, and I was kinda bunged up; so I stayed here that night.

"It was about—no, I'm goin' to tell you the truth about it. I wasn't lyin' about bein' bunged-up, but I didn't go to bed. I was settin' over there with Norma, talking about most everythin', I reckon. It was about half past ten when she went in the house. I sets there a while, and I'm about to go to bed, when I heard somebody come into the patio.

"It was pretty dark under the big tree that night. In fact, it was dark everywhere. But I was sure I seen two men. I know there was at least two men, but only one stepped out from under the tree. I don't believe either of 'em seen me, until I said, 'What do yuh want?'

"From the way they came sneakin' in, I knew they wasn't up to any good. They never said a word, and I started toward 'em. I says, 'What are yuh sneakin' around here for? Step out before I drill a hole in yuh.'

"I had just said that, when one of 'em shot at me. I seen the flash of the gun, and it was wide of the man I could see. I shot twice, as fast as I ever shot in my life—once at the flash and once at the man I could see. He

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went down, and I could hear the other man running.

"Now, Irish, I'm goin' to tell yuh somethin' that I ain't told anybody. I got scared. Yeah, I did. Yuh see, the sheriff ain't exactly a friend of mine. And under the circumstances I might—well, they might not believe there was a second man.

"The feller I shot had a loaded Colt .45 in his holster, and a belt full of shells. I figured I better shoot his gun once, as sort of an alibi for that bullet that missed me. So I took his gun, snapped every shell in it, and not a damn one of 'em would go off.

"So I took out the shells, put in some of my own, fired one shot and left the gun on the ground beside him. My story and the evidence looked all right to the sheriff and coroner. None of 'em knew the Mexican. This poor greaser was given a gun loaded with dummy shells, because somebody was mebbe supposed to kill him. Oh, I'll be damned if I can figure it out. But if the Mex wasn't a lamb bein' led to slaughter, I don't know much."

"What did they do with the body?" asked Irish.

"Buried it at Oro Springs the next day. None of the Mexicans around there knew who he was. The coroner exonerated me right away. Of course, I never told any of 'em about the dummy shells; I've only told you, Irish. Now, what do you make of it?"

Irish shook his head as he rolled a cigarette. "Sounds complicated," he admitted. "Of course, I don't know anybody around here, so I can't even make a guess on what it might be about."

"Well, I dunno, Irish. If John Austin would come back, it—" Dusty stopped as two riders came into the patio.

"Our esteemed sheriff and his deputy," he said softly.

MIKE EAGAN, the sheriff, was a blocky sort of person, with a short-clipped gray mustache, narrow eyes and a wide, firm lipped mouth. "Telescope" Tolliver, his deputy, was a lanky, long-faced cowboy, one cheek bulging with chewing tobacco.

"Hello, Davis," said the sheriff crisply.

"Howdy, Mike," replied Dusty. "How are yuh, Telescope?"

"Wilder 'n a hawk," grinned Telescope.

Dusty introduced them to Irish O'Shea.

"I know wharat is that there Seven Cut spread," said Telescope. "It used to belong to old Bedrock Belton. I hived up there one night couple years ago."

"Where's John Austin?" asked the sheriff.

"I dunno," replied Dusty. "He's likely down in Santa Juana."

"He is, eh? You been down there lately, Dusty?"

"Yeah, I was down there yesterday."

"Uh huh." The sheriff shifted in his saddle. "I heard yuh was."

"Who was tellin' yuh?" asked Dusty calmly.

"Oh, I jist heard."

"Yeah," said Telescope. "Somebody said yuh raised hell down there."

"Yuh don't have to raise it down there," replied Dusty. "It's already raised."

"It's none of our business," decided the sheriff. "But here's somethin' that is our business, Dusty. Last night somebody dug up that Mexican yuh shot."

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"Dug him up?"

"Plumb out of ground, and forgot to plant him again," said Telescope.

Dusty looked his amazement. "Say, that's a hell of a thing to do, Mike!"

"Maybe," suggested Irish, "they wanted to be sure he was dead."

"There's somethin' to that," admitted the sheriff. "They dug him up, smashed the box and took him out. But, damn 'em, they never buried him again."

"That's a dirty trick," grinned Dusty.

"What the hell's funny about it?" demanded the sheriff. "We had to nail up the box again and shovel all that dirt back into the grave."

"We, hell!" grunted Telescope. "I was the one what had to do it. All you done was set on a mound and watch me."

"Mike's careful," grinned Dusty. "He wouldn't even trust yuh with a corpse. It's a wonder to me he keeps yuh on the job at all."

"There's got to be some brains in the office," replied Telescope.

"That's right," agreed Dusty. "You might help O'Shea find a bunch of missin' two-year-old horses, marked on the right hip with the Seven Cut brand."

"Hell! He can't even read a brand!" snorted the sheriff.

"I'll betcha he could alter one," chuckled Dusty. Telescope's ears reddened.

"You've been readin' some old reward notices," said the sheriff.

"I reckon I better go home, before my past gits all unfolded," sighed the lanky deputy. "I can hear my family skillington beginnin' to rattle."

"Yore what?" asked Dusty.

"Skillington. What's left, after yore insides are out and yore outside is off."

"You mean skeleton," said Dusty.

TELESCOPE nodded. "Yeah, I reckon I do. Was you jokin', or is O'Shea really lookin' for some lost Seven Cut horses?"

"It's no joke," said Irish. "We've lost thirty head — taken away in a bunch. I've been driftin' for a week, huntin' for sign."

"He drifted into Mexico," grinned Dusty. "Didn't know he was across the line, until some of Morales's soldiers picked him up."

"Uh-hu-u-uh!" grunted the sheriff. "What did they do to yuh?"

"Well," smiled Irish, "they kinda acted up a little and took me over to tell it to General Morales. We had a little *tequila,* done a little target shootin', and called it a day. He's a nice old feller."

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Telescope. "He'd make a great Sunday school teacher. A man of very fine morals. It's a dirty shame, but if he's ever caught on this side of the line, Uncle Sam would hang him so high he could look down on the moon."

"Well, he was nice to me," said Irish. "He didn't even keep my gun. I've got a silver trimmed ridin' rig and the best horse that ever went across the border, but he didn't even keep them."

"Tell the truth and shame the devil," said the sheriff. "We happen to know that you fellers shot yore way out of Santa Juana."

"Well, can you imagine that?" blurted Dusty. "How many was killed, Mike?"

"I didn't git no list of the dead, but the live ones are shore boilin' down there. I'd stay out of there, if I was you."

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"Horses couldn't drag me back," declared Dusty. "I won't go where they talk behind my back. What else do yuh know, Mike?"

"I know they've doubled the Border Patrol. I talked with Jim Boyle and he said there was whispers of another revolution. Mebbe they've doubled the patrol to stop gun runnin'. A fat lot of good that'll do, with Pablo Ortez and his gang over there. There's one smart Mexican."

"I never met him," said Irish.

"He's shore a comical jigger," said Telescope. "Dresses swell, talks worse English than Morales, and makes yuh like him, whether yuh want to or not. Yuh know damn well he's as crooked as a corkscrew, but yuh like to talk with him."

"What business is he in?" asked Irish.

"Cattle business, gamblin', smugglin'—and makin' love to every damn female he meets," said the sheriff. "Said he was a bull fighter in Mexico City, a captain in the Federal army; and anythin' else that he happens to think about at the time. I wouldn't believe him as far as I could throw this bronc by the tail. He owns a rancho about three miles from Santa Juana, runs quite a few cows, and harbors the finest bunch of outlaws on earth. There ain't an American workin' on his rancho that ain't got a price on his head. I'll betcha I've got reward notices to cover every man on his place."

"I wonder if them thirty head of Seven Cut horses are down on his place," said Irish.

"If they are, you better leave 'em there."

"I dunno," grinned Irish. "It might be fun to go down and take 'em away from him."

"Daw-gone!" said Dusty softly.

The sheriff snorted and picked up his reins. "I reckon we'll be on our way. Pleased to have met yuh, Mr. O'Shea. If yuh want to leave any message, I'll see that it reaches Ocotillo City safely."

"Thank yuh, Mr. Eagan," replied Irish, "but I've got the luck of the Irish, and I always deliver my messages in person."

CHAPTER IV.

AUSTIN'S RETURN.

IT was about an hour later when John Austin came home. Dusty and Irish were in the stable, and came out as he dismounted. Austin was a big man, his close-cropped hair nearly white, his face deeply lined. Dissipation had left its mark in the sagging face muscles, tightly drawn lips and haggard eyes. He did not speak to Dusty as the cowboy took charge of unsaddling the horse, nor did he appear to notice the presence of a strange cowboy.

"Is Norma at the house?" he asked Dusty.

"Yeah, she's up there," replied Dusty, and the big man went slowly toward the house.

"He's shore been on a bender, ain't he?" asked Dusty as he pulled off the saddle.

"Yeah," replied Irish, "it looks to me as though the snakes were just about to come out of hibernation for him. Is he always thataway?"

"He never was before, Irish. Hell, it ain't a bit like him. Why, he never ever seen you. I dunno." Dusty hung up the saddle and scratched his head. "Somethin' has done gone wrong with John Austin."

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And Dusty's prophecy was absolutely right; something *had* happened to John Austin. He was sitting in a rocking chair in the main room of the ranch house, his head buried in his hands, while Norma leaned against a massive tables, hands braced on the table behind her. There was no color in her face, but her eyes were fairly blazing with anger.

"So you gambled away everything," she said slowly. "Twenty thousand dollars! That means that the Cross-A rancho is lost to us. Oh, dad, why did you do this? It isn't fair."

Norma choked back her tears. John Austin lifted his head and looked at her dumbly.

"And you borrowed the money from a Chinaman," she said huskily. "A Chinaman will get this home—my home. When is Li Wang going to claim this place?"

"Lord only knows," replied her father miserably. "Oh, I've been a fool, Norma. I'm sick and so tired I can hardly sit up. It's a damnable nightmare. But the damage is done. I can curse the day I ever went to Santa Juana; but cursing won't alter the situation."

He got heavily to his feet and started toward his room. Norma ran to him and took his arm.

He looked at her, drew her tightly to him for a moment, choked over what he wanted to say, and went on to his room. Norma went out into the patio in time to see Dusty and Irish riding away. She sat down on a shady bench and tried to think what it would mean to her to lose the ranch. They would be broke and without a home. She knew there was very little money in the bank at Oro Springs. As she sat there in the shade of the giant sycamore, a man stepped softly into the patio, and she lifted her head to see Pablo Ortez smiling at her.

PABLO was immaculate in a semi-military riding outfit, white sombrero, polished boots.

"Thees ees great pleasure, *señorita,*" he said. "Please do not get up. Señor Austeen ees at 'ome?"

"My father is sleeping," replied Norma.

"Sleeping on such a beautiful day? Weeth birds seenging and—oh, well, I sleep sometime myself, personally."

Pablo smiled widely and brushed an imaginary speck off the lapel of his coat. Norma was not at all afraid of Ortez. No matter what he might be in Mexico, he had always been a gentleman on the American side of the border.

"Why did you wish to see my father?" she asked.

Pablo shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, notheeng from eemportance. I am jus' w'at you say, making leetle call. Ees that right theeng to say?"

"If it is the truth—yes."

Pablo drew a long face. "*Señorita,* I'm never tell lie to a lady."

Norma looked closely at him. "Then tell me, Pablo Ortez, did you know my father borrowed twenty thousand dollars from Li Wang?"

"I'm 'ear that," he replied seriously. "I do not know for sure."

"Did you know he lost all that money?"

"Eet ees not for me to say, because I do not know for sure."

"How did he lose that much money?"

"*Quién sabe?* Poker, écarté, roulette."

"Who won it from him?"

Pablo shrugged his shoulders. "That ees 'ard to say. Eef you fall een a cac-

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tus, can you say wheech steecker go mos' deeper?"

Norma nodded thoughtfully. There were plenty of gamblers to take the money.

"Did you hear what happened in Santa Juana last night?" she asked.

Pablo smiled slowly. "*Señorita,* there ees plenty people to talk of sometheeng. Who knows eef they tell it right? These things I did not see—I only hear of them."

"You heard that Irish O'Shea escaped from Morales, helped Dusty Davis to escape, and then the two of them took me away from two Santa Juana policemen?"

"Morales! Bah! Fat peeg! Army! I tak' one shotgun, declare war, and that army ron like hell. But, *señorita,* who ees thees man who get away from Morales—thees Americano *vaquero?*"

"Mr. O'Shea?"

"*Si.*"

"He is searching for thirty head of horses which were stolen from the Seven Cut outfit, up near Ocotillo City."

Pablo's mouth opened in a soundless "Oh!" and he nodded thoughtfully.

"And so he look for them in Mejico, eh?" he said.

"And Morales's men caught him," added Norma.

Pablo laughed softly.

"What was the name of that Mexican who was shot here?"

"The one they bury in Oro Spreengs? Hees name was Salas."

"You knew him, did you?"

"Not ver' good. He was cousin from General Morales."

"Then what in the world was he doing here?"

"Getting himself keeled, mos'ly," smiled Pablo. "Well, *señorita,* I mus' go now."

"I'll tell dad you called," said Norma.

"*Gracias, señorita;* you are ver' kind, ver' beautiful. In fac', you are so ver' beautiful that I could almos' lie to you—and believe it myself. *Adios.*"

He stepped outside the patio, swung gracefully into his saddle and rode away.

CHAPTER V.

RUSTLERS.

ORO SPRINGS was a quaint little town, its architecture more Mexican than American. The sheriff's office was a little adobe hut, attached to a brick jail, almost in the center of town, opening out on a small, tree-shaded plaza. Irish, Dusty and Telescope sat, on a plaza bench, smoking cigarettes and talking things over. There were many rumors of a revolution to come soon, which gave food for conversation.

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit if them thirty horses was in Mexico," said Telescope. "And I'll tell yuh why. Santa Juana is never Federal. I mean, it is always a rebel town. If they could run thirty head of horses down there, they'd help the rebel cavalry a lot. But if they're down in that country, you can kiss 'em good-by."

"I never kissed a horse good-by in my life," replied Irish O'Shea.

"You'd be one awful fool to go down there again. I can show yuh pictures on reward notices of some of the men we know damn well are down there with Pablo Ortez—and they're a forked bunch."

"That's all right," nodded Irish, "but them horses are worth plenty money; mebbe a hundred dollars apiece. I ain't furnishin' free remounts

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for no danged revolutionists. Me and Dusty can go down there and whip the present army."

"That army ain't nothin'," grinned Telescope. "They ain't got them horses."

"They shore wasn't well mounted when I seen 'em," laughed Irish. "I'll betcha the coyotes cry every time they see that bunch of broom-tails. Dusty, you've been down to the Ortez rancho, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah, I've been there," admitted Dusty.

"Does it lay in such a way that a couple of us could surprise 'em?"

"Sure, yuh could," said Telescope quickly. "They'd sure as hell be surprised at yore lack of brains in comin' down there. Well, here comes some of the brave Border Patrol, wearin' out horseshoes for our Uncle Sammie. That's Henderson and a couple new men. All yuh have to do is rumor a revolution, and help cometh to the border."

The three riders stopped at a store and dismounted, but Henderson, a lean-faced border officer, spied the three men in the shade and came over to them.

"Has war busted out yet, Henderson?" asked the deputy.

"Not yet, Telescope. Whew! That sun is mighty hot to-day. How are yuh, Dusty?"

"Pretty good, Henderson. Meet Irish O'Shea, from Ocotillo City."

They shook hands, and Henderson sat down to roll a smoke.

"Has Austin been sellin' beef to Mexico?" asked the officer.

"I never heard of him sellin' any," replied Dusty. "What do yuh mean?"

Henderson lighted his cigarette lazily and leaned back.

"I jist wondered," he replied. "I seen the dust of a small herd across the line, headin' south. Picked 'em up with my glasses, and there was prob'ly forty head, with six, seven men herdin'."

"Where?" asked Dusty.

"Almost due south of the Cross A."

"Well, I'm a son-of-a-gun! Forty head? Meat for the army, eh? That's bad, boys."

"No use hurryin' away about it," said Telescope. "Forty head will keep 'em eatin' for a while, Dusty."

"That's over two thousand dollars' worth of beef!" snorted Dusty.

"I thought you'd like to know about it," said Henderson lazily.

"Yo're darn right I do! But it's too late to stop 'em now."

"Here comes an old friend of yours, Dusty," said Telescope.

IT was a portly Chinaman, wearing American clothes, sitting in an open buggy under the shade of a parasol, and driving a sway-backed, gray horse. He drove the animal up to the front of a Chinese restaurant, climbed ponderously out of the equipage and tied the tired animal with a rope strong enough to hold an elephant.

"Friend of mine!" snorted Dusty. "Li Wang."

"The King of Santa Juana," added Telescope.

"And the brains," said Henderson softly. "For a year we've watched Li Wang, and all we ever got was a headache. There's dope comin' in from Santa Juana, that's a cinch; mebbe Chinamen. And Li Wang is at the bottom of it all."

"Does he live at Santa Juana?" asked Irish.

"He lives right here," replied Dusty. "He owns that restaurant, but don't run it. Drives back and forth in that

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funny buggy between here and Santa Juana."

"Yeah, and we've searched him dozens of times," sighed Henderson, "and the most we ever found on him was a package of Mexican cigarettes. If he's got anythin' dutiable to bring across, he pays on the nail. But we'll get him some day."

"Like hell," said Telescope. "You may get one of his shipments, but you'll never get Li Wang. And what a poker player he is!"

"Are the games pretty high?" asked Irish.

"Down in Santa Juana? Yo're damn right. Li Wang banks the poker game, and the sky is the limit."

"I'd like to play in his game some day," said Irish.

Telescope looked pityingly at Irish. "Barnum was right."

"Just the same," said Irish, "me and Dusty are goin' to p[illegible]on a little private revolution. They owe the Seven Cut for thirty head of horses, and they owe the Cross A for forty head of cows. That's a lot better cause for a revolution than they've ever had in Mexico."

"You fellers better keep out of there," advised Henderson. "That revolution is due to bust any old day—and I'm tellin' you that Santa Juana ain't no healthy place for an Americano when it busts. Of course, it's yore funeral."

"You ort to carry a basin of water with yuh," said Dusty.

"What for?" asked Henderson.

"So yuh can wash yore hands of all responsibility every time a damn fool cow waddie don't take yore advice."

"Oh, I ain't advisin' yuh. I wouldn't waste my time in advisin' a bug-headed cow-poke. Go on down there, mix into things that don't concern yuh, and git lined up against a blank wall."

"I suppose them forty cows don't concern me, eh?"

"Are you so damn cow-patriotic that you'd give up yore life for a few of 'em?"

"That's all he knows," said Telescope. "If he was lucky, he'd be a hero in the eyes of a few Herefords and some cross-breeds. If they lined him up against a blank wall, he'd prob'ly die yellin', 'I'm only sorry that I ain't got more lives to give for my dogies.'"

"Is it really dangerous down there?" asked Irish innocently.

Henderson looked pityingly at Irish, sighed and turned away.

"Didn't yuh find that out when yuh was there?" asked Telescope.

"Well, it wasn't bad," drawled Irish. "All I done was kick the wind out of General Morales's sentry, shoot a policeman and ride out of town. Yuh can't call that dangerous."

Henderson looked up quickly.

"Oh, yo're the feller Boyle was tellin' about, are yuh?" he asked.

"The same one," grinned Dusty, and the border officer looked upon Irish O'Shea with more interest.

"Well, even at that, I wouldn't want to be in yore boots, if Morales got yuh again."

"I'm not walkin' into his arms again," laughed Irish. "The next time General Morales gets his hands on me, if he ever does, he'll be able to charge me with somethin' bigger than packin' a gun in his dog-gone country. I know him as well as you do. If the Mexican Federals ever capture him in a revolution, they'll hang him without a trial. And he don't dare cross into this country."

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"That's right," nodded Henderson. "But why would the Federals ever want to capture Santa Juana? As a port of entry, it's a joke. The revenue wouldn't be worth anythin' to 'em. No railroads. Hell, there ain't even good wagon roads. But it's a great place to run guns, horses and meat for the revolutionists. Morales is no fool, even if he is drunk most of the time. If the Federals should come—he's a loyal Federal. If the rebels come, he furnishes 'em with guns, meat and horses. He plays both ends against the middle—he's the middle—and he can't lose."

Henderson got up and strolled back to his horse, where his two companions were mounting.

"He's a mighty efficient officer," said Telescope. "Never catches any smugglers, but he tries hard."

"I was jist thinkin' about that smugglin' stuff," said Irish. "What's to prevent smugglers from hidin' along the border, waitin' for a patrol to pass, and then comin' across to this side?"

"Pardner," drawled Telescope, "if you can find out *what could* prevent 'em from doin' that—Uncle Sam will pay yuh big money."

Dusty and Irish proceeded to ride out to the Cross A, where Norma told them of Ortez's visit and what she had learned of the dead Mexican.

John Austin was still asleep at suppertime, and after supper the two cowboys rode back to Oro Springs. Li Wang was still at his restaurant, the old horse nodding at the little hitch rack. They found Mike Eagan at his office, Telescope being out to supper.

"WE found out who that Mexican was, Mike," said Dusty.

"Yuh did, eh? So did I. Doc Rice took some papers off him that night and forgot to turn 'em over to me. Doc is the most absent minded feller I ever knew. Now, you tell me who he was."

"His name was Salas, and he's a cousin of Morales," replied Dusty.

"A cousin of Morales, eh? I didn't know that part of it, but his name was Salas. Pete Salas. But he didn't belong in Mexico."

"He didn't?"

"No. His papers show that he lived in Douglas."

"What else do yuh know?" asked Irish.

"I talked to Jim Boyle at the border," replied the sheriff. "He saw Salas and talked with him that night. Salas came from Santa Juana. He didn't tell Boyle where he was goin'. But Boyle says he's pretty sure Salas didn't enter Mexico through Santa Juana."

"I don't reckon it makes much difference, anyway," said Dusty.

"No, I don't suppose it does," agreed the sheriff. "But I'd sure like to know why he went to the Cross A and took a shot at you when you asked him what he wanted."

"So would I," nodded Dusty.

"You didn't lie about that, didja, Dusty?"

"I hope to tell yuh, I didn't. I never seen the man in my life; and I'm not in the habit of lyin' to a sheriff."

"Well," said the sheriff dryly, "we've all got our own ideas of how many times a feller can lie, before it becomes a habit."

"He's chidin' yuh, Dusty," said Irish seriously.

"I know he is," wailed Dusty. "But what can I do? He's got the law and order all on his side; and all I've got is my honor."

"Yore what?"

"Oh, there's no use goin' into de-

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tails," sighed Dusty. "I spoke of somethin' that you never had, nor prob'ly never heard about."

"Git out of here, you cow-ranch comedian!" exploded the sheriff.

"C'mon, Irish," sighed Dusty. "The sheriff's got a mad on, 'cause I didn't come right out and tell him that I snuck up on that Mexican and shot him down in cold blood. He's so mean minded that he scares me. I don't wish him any bad luck, but I hope all his children have warts. C'mon."

They went across the street and sat down in the Oro Saloon.

"Mike ordered us out of the office," said Dusty.

"Hell, that's nothin'!" grunted Telescope. "He fires me ever' few days. That's about the only chance he has to show his authority."

"But he's a pretty good sheriff, ain't he?" asked Irish.

"His record is as clean as a hound's tooth; he ain't done nothin' good and he ain't done nothin' bad. He fired me yesterday. Yuh see, he just got that set of false teeth for the top side of his mouth, and I told him he had a good alibi for keepin' his mouth shut, 'cause if he didn't, some one would steal 'em."

"But yuh didn't stay fired," said Dusty.

"No-o-o-o, he hired me back. But he'll prob'ly have the county dock me for the few hours I was off the job."

CHAPTER VI.

NIGHT ASSAULT.

JOHNNY LINK, Doc Smalley, Ollie Reed and Omaha Tozier came in. Omaha tried to jerk the chair from under Telescope, and before the scuffle was over they had upset several more chairs and a poker table.

The bartender swore bitterly over a torn place on the green covered table top, where a spur had ripped the cover.

"A feller ort to have cast-iron furniture around here," he said.

"Well, why don'tcha?" asked Omaha. "All this here delicate stuff! If yore furniture was as strong as yore whisky, yuh couldn't shoot holes in it."

"Omaha, do yuh remember the furniture in that saloon down at Whippoorwill?" asked Telescope.

"Do I? Man, man, that was furniture! Everythin' was iron. The pool table was all iron, with a silver top. It atch'ly was. I never seen such a place in my life. And jist as soon as yuh showed up the bartender started shovin' bottles down the bar to yuh. Never cost yuh a cent. Drink all yuh wanted."

"Champagne, too," added Telescope. "They was hospitable."

"I don't believe that's true," said the bartender.

"Well, we ort to know, hadn't we?" asked Omaha. "We was there."

"I still don't believe it."

"Why don'tcha believe it?"

"Because, if it was true, you'd both still be there."

"We'd still be there, but the whole town burned down, and they never built her up again."

"Well," said the bartender, "we ain't givin' away free drinks; and what do yuh know about that?"

"We know it," replied Omaha. "Why, it's the talk of the country. This place has got a reputation for bein' stingy. I'll buy a drink."

Omaha motioned for the bartender to have one with them.

"It's a total loss," warned Telescope.

"It's a experiment," said Omaha. "I know it 'll harden his arteries,

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but I want to see if it'll soften his heart. Well, here's hopin' that the bartender gits human."

It cost a dollar to treat the crowd, and by the time seven had been spent, the bartender's heart had softened. Oro Springs whisky had more authority than a newly appointed policeman. Irish O'Shea tried one, and shifted his affections to some sorry looking cigars, which had been in stock all too long. When he blew on them the dust flew out through the dry wrappers.

"They ort to burn good," said Telescope.

"Too good," said Irish. "I'm scared of spontaneous combustion."

The bartender looked owlishly at Irish. "What didja say?"

Irish groaned and leaned on the bar.

"Tell him to go to hell," suggested Doc Smalley.

"It's my turn to buy," declared Omaha. "We'll go 'round the wheel once more and then go home."

"That makes shixteen drinks," said Johnny Link, counting on his fingers. "Eight more 'n we've had now. Where'd yuh git the extra bartender?"

"Shut one eye," advised Omaha. "That'll e-limi-nate the one on the left."

"What 'bout the one on the right shide?" asked Doc Smalley. "He's my ex'ra one, Omaha."

"You feller's 'r cheap," said Ollie Reed. "I can shee three of 'm."

"Well, sir," said Omaha loftily, "I'd like to work with a bunch of good two-fisted drinkers again, like we used to on the old 99, eh, Telescope?"

TELESCOPE sighed heavily. "They don't make 'em," he said. "We're all that's left, Omaha. Wasn't that a ranch, though! It was *the* ranch."

"Big?" asked the bartender. "I've seen the 101, and that's—"

"Hundred and One!" snorted Omaha. "That—that farm! I was talkin' of a ranch, feller."

The sheriff walked in, eyed the crowd with evident disfavor, and sat down.

"That was a ranch," agreed Telescope. "The south line fence wasn't more'n three miles from Whippoorwill, and the main ranch house was right in the middle of the spread; but the place was so big that a feller went to town to git the mail on the very day that the Spanish American War started, and it was all over before he could git back."

"That sounds exaggerated," said Omaha, "but it wasn't. We had fifteen thousand cowpunchers as a reg'lar crew. 'Course at roundup time we had quite a bunch around there. Telescope, do yuh remember how the cooks used to howl at havin' hot cakes for breakfast every mornin'?"

"I shore do."

"How the hell could they cook that many?" asked the bartender. "No griddle is that big."

"It was a sight," admitted Omaha. "That there griddle was acres and acres big. They had sixty men on roller skates, whizzing around over that griddle with big pitchers of batter; and sixty more right behind 'em with scoop shovels."

"That wasn't what interested me so much," said Telescope. "I used to like to watch 'em grease that griddle. Every one of them fellers would strap a strip of bacon on each foot, and go skatin' over that hot iron. Man, they used to take some great spills! But they enjoyed it."

"Remember that big steer?" asked Omaha.

"That old mossy-horn? Shore do.

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Was you there the day we measured his horns? Yeah, I thought yuh was. Sixty feet from tip to tip."

"My Gawd!" exclaimed the bartender. "That was a real longhorn."

"No, he wasn't," denied Telescope. "The longhorns was all gone at the time. This was a cross-breed; but he had fair horns."

"Remember what he weighed?" asked Omaha. "I'm kinda hazy as to whether it was seventeen or seventy tons."

"Forty-seven," said Telescope. "You was pretty close. How about another drink? C'mon, sheriff."

"You fellers are the finest pair of liars on earth," declared the sheriff as he came up to the bar.

"You ain't never seen that 99 outfit, have yuh?" asked Dusty.

"No, I never did."

"Then judge not, lest ye be judged."

DUSTY took a silver dollar between his fingers, made a few deft passes and the dollar disappeared. Then he reached out and seemed to pluck it from the sheriff's vest pocket.

"Pretty good," admitted the sheriff, as he poured out a drink. "I seen a feller up in Phoenix last summer, and he shore done some good tricks. He broke an egg in a hat and drawed out a chicken."

"Oh, that old trick," laughed Dusty. "It's simple."

"You can't do it."

"I'll betcha this dollar that I can. No, I can't either; I ain't got no chicken. Well, lemme see."

Dusty walked over and picked up a pool ball.

"It's easier with a chicken, but this will do. I'll betcha I can bust an egg in yore hat, right in plain view of all of yuh, stir it up, and bring out this pool ball. I'll betcha a dollar it won't hurt yore hat."

"I'll jist take that bet," said the sheriff. "Git the egg."

The bartender gave Dusty an egg, and the sheriff handed Dusty his fairly new Stetson. Dusty asked them to all stand back several feet from the table, and after a lot of hocus-pocus he broke the egg into the hat, stirred it industriously with his fingers for several moments, wiped his fingers on his chaps and tossed the dollar beside the hat.

"You win," he said dismally. "It didn't work. Whose turn is it to buy the drink? This'n ought to be on the sheriff."

And there stood the disgusted sheriff, examining the interior of his nearly-new hat, which was gobby with egg. And judging from the odor, it wasn't exactly a fresh egg. He didn't buy the drink. Muttering some choice curses under his breath, he walked out of the place.

Telescope doubled up with mirth, hammering a fist on the bar.

"That joke cost yuh a whole dollar," said Omaha.

"That dollar's been plugged in three places," replied Dusty. "Yuh couldn't even pass it on a blind beggar. Now, I'll buy a drink."

Telescope and Omaha had been mixing whisky, brandy and gin with devastating effect on their nervous systems. This last drink, a full glass of brandy, caused Telescope to sway dangerously. Soon he was sitting on the barrail, trying to lead the gang in song, and a few moments later he was snoring industriously, his back against the bar.

"Gotta take 'm home," declared Johnny Link.

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"Abs'lutely," agreed Ollie. "Gotta."

"Whazzat?" asked Doc Smalley. "I'm all right."

"Nobody talkin' about you," said Dusty. "But as far as that's concerned, you'll never be able to drink enough to be all right, Doc. I'll tell yuh what let's do; let's take Telescope over to the office and present him to the sheriff. Omaha, will you make the speech?"

"Where's Omaha?" asked Doc.

"Him and the bartender are asleep on the floor behind the bar," grinned Irish. "Man, they went out like a couple of candles in a wind."

"Well, we'll pack Telescope over to the office, and then take Omaha home," decided Dusty. "Ollie, you and Doc and Johnny grab onto Telescope. Here—I'll help yuh. Irish, you pack his hat. Grab his legs, Ollie; easy, yo're pullin' off his boots."

IN some unaccountable way they managed to lift the lanky deputy off the floor, and went staggering toward the doorway. Ollie, Doc and Johnny were almost in Telescope's condition, and their sense of direction was absolutely nil.

"Gee! Gee!" yelled Dusty.

But Ollie and Doc didn't "gee" at all.

Crash! They butted into the wall, three feet from the doorway, and all sat down heavily, letting Telescope down with a resounding thump.

"If I find the man moved that door, I'll kill'm," declared Ollie seriously. "Shomebody jerked it away, Doc."

"Wait a minute," begged Dusty. "Let's slide him right outside."

They managed to drag the inert Telescope through the doorway and into the street. Irish sat down on the sidewalk and choked with mirth as the four cowboys tried to lift and carry the deputy. Their efforts were not concerted, and each blamed the other.

Finally they got him off the ground, wending their erratic way across the street toward the sheriff's office. Irish followed, weak from laughing. There was no light in the office.

"Git that door open, Irish," panted Dusty. "If we ever let loose of him again, we'll never get him up. Left, Doc! Not right—left!"

Irish jumped ahead and flung the door open ahead of the men who were surging forward at a dog-trot. Ollie and Doc were cut down at the doorstep, but Dusty and Johnny shoved Telescope straight ahead and fell into the room with him; three dull thuds, and then silence.

Irish leaned against the front of the building and drew a deep breath, as he waited for conversation to start. It was Dusty's voice that broke the stillness.

"What happened to Telescope? His hair's all sticky. Will some of you dumb cow waddies light a lamp?"

"Whazzamatter?" asked Ollie. "Who's doin' alla yellin', I'd crave to know; that's what I'd crave."

"Allus cravin'," complained Johnny Link. "Have I got m' own leg over the back of m' neck? Nope, that ain't my boot. Ouch! Nope, it ain't mine. I've got more sense than to kick m'self in the face."

"Will somebody li-i-i-ight the la-a-a-amp?" wailed Dusty.

"Light it yourshelf, can'tcha?" asked Ollie weakly.

"Mus' be me," said Doc Smalley. "Yore voice shounds close."

"I'll light it," choked Irish. "Hold still, so I won't trip over all of yuh."

Irish made a guess as to the location of the lamp, stopped against the desk and scratched a match. He lighted the

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small lamp and turned it on the assemblage. Telescope and the four cowboys were on the floor, and beside Dusty, lying flat on his face, his head a welter of gore, was Mike Eagan, the sheriff.

Dusty got quickly to his feet and helped Irish turn the sheriff over on his back. Eagan was still alive. Irish looked quickly around the little office. The safe, an old key-lock thing, was wide open. The drawers had been taken from the desk, their contents strewn on the floor.

"Stay here," panted Dusty. "I'll get Doctor Rice."

"You boys better git up," advised Irish. "It might look bad to the doctor."

"Whazzit all about?" asked Ollie. "Who hittum, Irish?"

"*Quién sabe?* See if yuh can't get Telescope over to the pump and soak his head good. He'll have to take charge now."

"'Ze dead?" asked Johnny.

"No, he's still alive."

TELESCOPE protested weakly against waking up, but they finally got him out of the office, and the four of them headed in the general direction of the livery stable watering trough. A few moments later Doctor Rice and Dusty reached the office. Dusty had explained how they had found the sheriff, and the doctor made a swift examination.

"We've got to get him down to my house," he said. "I can't do very much here."

The sheriff was no light man, but they carried him. The doctor's wife was also a nurse, and they were quickly at work. Eagan had been struck several times with a blunt instrument and had lost considerable blood.

"May be a fracture," said the doctor. "Can't tell a thing yet. He's strong. Nothing you two can do, except try and discover why he was assaulted."

They went back to the street and found Telescope at the office, soaking wet, but partly sober.

"If I hadn't been a good swimmer, them fools would have drowned me and themselves," declared Telescope. "I saved Ollie twice and Johnny once. They've gone over to try and wake up Omaha. Now, tell me about Mike."

Dusty told him all they knew about it. Telescope looked at the open safe and at the scattered papers, shaking his head blankly.

"I cain't figure it out," he said wearily.

"I'm shore disappointed in yuh," declared Dusty. "Me and Irish was sure you could set right up and explain it all."

"I've got a theory," said Telescope.

"If that's a new brand of hiccups, you have."

"Let him tell it," advised Irish. "What is yore theory, Telescope?"

"Well," replied Telescope, "it looks to me as though somebody wanted to read Mike's mail."

"Aw, go stick yore head in the trough again!" snorted Dusty. "C'mon, Irish; let's go round up them drunks and go home. The first thing yuh know, we'll all be crazy like Telescope."

"Allus belittlin'," sighed Telescope. "I guess I better go down and see if Mike's dead yet. He's awful hard headed."

"Well, he may die, at that," said Dusty.

"Most everybody does, at one time or another," replied Telescope.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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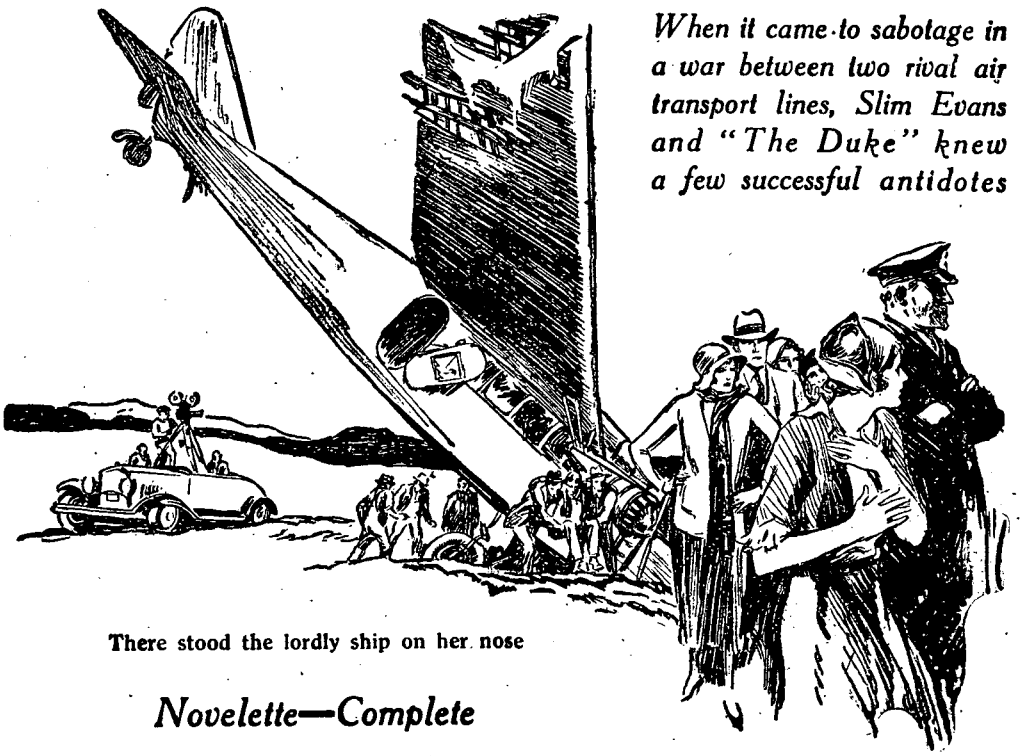
Hot Airmen

By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of "Soldiers of the Storm," "X Marks the Lot," etc.

When it came to sabotage in a war between two rival air transport lines, Slim Evans and "The Duke" knew a few successful antidotes



There stood the lordly ship on her nose

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

PACIFIC PILOTS, INC.

THERE is no doubt that somewhere back in remote ages, when men grew hair for their vests, a strain of the wild cuckoo got mixed into the old English blood of the Evanses. This adulteration is undoubtedly responsible for the fact that practically every time a clock ticks I talk out of turn, and thereby get snarled up in some kind of trouble. When asked to do something, I always say yes. Trouble follows invariably. In the particular case to which I am referring, several friends of mine were the boys on the uneasy seat. Then after I'd said "yes" to John Benton, and landed on the West Coast, I found a tack in my own seat.

As a result of the happenings of that crowded day, this particular first lieutenant in the Army Air Service no longer has restless moments when he wishes he was out in the world, fighting for his spot in the bread line. I have decided to stay curled up in the arms of my Uncle Samuel, peeking coyly through his sheltering beard and watching the rest of the world go buy.

Between breakfast and lunch of a certain misty morning, I saw a possible quarter of a million dollars, the repu-

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tations of two good guys, and the future of three men and a business all endangered by likes and dislikes as unexplainable as the deep hatred between my stomach and the onions that sprout in the spring, tra la, the scallions that scent up the spring! As a result, the aforementioned Lieutenant John Evans, better known as Slim, has resolved to give up all wine, except champagne or possibly a quart or two of Chianti several times a week, all women under eighteen or over eighty, and all jokes concerning traveling salesmen; and otherwise to live a pure and upright life. (I gave up singing in my youth, by request.)

"I alone am to blame," said Duval

When I say that only a last minute understanding between two cookies, each of whom thought the other half-baked, averted tragedy, I don't mean that they were faced with losing their jobs, or that they narrowly escaped having a check returned. I mean that jail, for almost every crime except murder, along with the loss of every worldly possession but their used socks, was averted by a miracle. Let one say right now that any time Lieutenant Cuckoo X. Evans gets a sensible thought and accomplishes something he's set out to do, without gumming it up, it *is* a miracle.

It started, reading from left to right, at six-fifteen on a morning in August—which is a heathenish hour, and against God! Step up and join me and two ex-army flyers as we stand in the huge hangar belonging to Pacific Pilots, Incorporated, and gaze at the towering bulk of a Ward Tri-Motored monoplane. It looked so big, with its wing tips almost invisible in the murky half darkness of the hangar, that a two-ton Douglas mail ship alongside it reminded one of a model some kid had made.

"Well," rumbled big John Benton, president and founder of Pacific Pilots, Inc., "there she is. Take a look at your sixty thousand bucks, Bobby—and pray!"

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His heavy, square face was decorated with a wistful grin. The big fellow was trying desperately to hide the fact that he was worried sick.

"Well, she looks capable of carrying your whole damn company in her cabin, with room enough for a drink for one and all," I stated.

Bobby Agnew drew in a deep breath. "Hell, if we don't beat out that damn Corey outfit and sell our company to International Airways, I'll have to leave my happy home!"

Agnew was a pot-bellied, be-spectacled little peewee who, as a rising young merchant, was cleaning up in Los Angeles. The flame which had sent him into the Air Service ten years before still burned steadily except that the flame flickered whenever he thought of his wife and went out altogether when he was with her. I had discovered that while having dinner with them the evening before. It was her custom to train a very possessive and penetrating peeper upon Bobby's every action and thought. She was just an old-fashioned girl. Yeah!

DESPITE the solemnity which hung over that hangar thicker than the fog hung over the airdrome outside, I was forced to giggle.

"Every time I think of what will happen to you if she ever finds out that you are John's financial backer, I swallow a snicker," I announced.

"Hmm," grunted the scowling Benton. "Bobby and I used to laugh, too. Now, I'll be damned if I can!"

"I know," I said. "But everything will be all right. You two guys just forget that you haven't got another nickel in the world, then everything will be okay. In another two weeks you'll be throwing parties on the dough International Airways has paid you, and Bobby's wife will be reading a paper to the Women's Club about how smart her husband is."

"Haw!" hawed the hulking Benton. His stock of repartee consisted largely of "humpfs" and "haws" snorted, uttered, chuckled, or exclaimed in divers keys and with varying degrees of explosiveness. By pulling out different stops to fit the situation, he could express everything in the world with common "haws"—with the possible exception of the more difficult equations of the Einstein theory.

"To tell the truth," wailed Bobby as he wiped the sweat, although the morning was cold, from his partially bald head and his full moon face, "after the breaks we've been getting, I wouldn't be surprised if this baby never even got off the ground!"

Benton snorted and scratched his head, which was covered with coarse, curly black hair, like the mane of some old lion.

"That'd be a break for us!" he stated in his heavy bass voice. "It can't crack up if it never takes off."

"You make me laugh," I told him. "You grumble like a grizzly bear who's just found that her offspring is hitting the primrose path, just to hide the fact that you enjoy taking a chance in any form. You love this shooting the works, and you know it."

His moody eyes had been resting on the all-metal transport plane. Now they shifted to meet mine. They were big and black and turbulent looking, below heavy lids and black brows that were like a couple of mattresses.

"Do you think I'd be enjoying this," he said very slowly, "even if Bobby wasn't mixed up in it? I've had ten years of it, Slim."

The look in his eyes knocked me dead, and paralyzed my tongue. It was

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as though a sudden flash of light had given me a look into two dark pools of suffering.

"I know," I said awkwardly. "I was only kidding. After all, though, the good breaks have started already. Who'd have thought that Duke Duval would pop out of a clear sky and supply publicity, not to say tone—?"

"He hasn't really popped yet," growled John. "He gives me a pain!"

HE went on to mention definitely just what section of his anatomy was suffering from this shooting misery; and as though his remarks were a signal calling out of the air which was his natural habitat the very unregenerate freak we were talking about, the far away drone of a motor came to our ears.

"That's him coming now," I stated. "And just because you've got a goofy complex about a fellow that doesn't affect the fact that he's one of the best—and best publicized—flyers in the world. Nor that his flying your new ship for its first trip has been and is and will be worth more in advertising than having the queen of Insania endorse a new toothpaste. He'll put your lousy airplane company on the map—"

"You're right," piped up Bobby in what had once been a whisky tenor, but which his wife had changed to a near-beer baritone.

"Why are ten reporters shivering out there right now?" I went on, warming to my work. "Because they and the public give several damns about your company and the fact that you're fighting like hell for a fortune, with your backs against the wall?—Not by a damn sight! It's because Rupert Duval is completing an all-night flight from St. Louis so that he can fly your new plane for you, that's why!"

"That's one of the troubles with him," stated John heavily. His under lip was stuck forward in a pout as he said this. "He's a grandstander—always has been and always will be. All-night flight and that sort of junk. Why didn't he come in here like an ordinary man, without making a stunt of it?"

"Because Duke Duval is Duke Duval, you thick-headed moose! And if you don't quit letting your likes keep you broke and your dislikes putting you in hock, I'm going to knock you on the head and run your mangy outfit myself."

You can see from these tender words that Benton and I were old and close friends.

"Come on, let's go out," Bobby piped. "You know, I'm feeling better just knowing Duke's here. That onion'll probably have us merged with International Airways by noon—"

"With himself as president," I finished up for him. "And by night he'll have sold the works to A. Pierpont Brogan, and will be calling him Pierpy."

John produced and used one of the snorts from his collection headed "unwilling assent," and lagged behind for a second in order to take one more look at the big ship which represented so much—every dime, in fact, which he and Bobby had been able to get their paws on by any method short of grand larceny and murder, for one thing, and Benton's future, for another. The ship's broad wings were supposed to carry Pacific Pilots, Inc. into the high realms of profit and fame, and to turn the heart breaking failure of the last ten years of John's life into a success which would compensate him for one of the bitterest lifetimes I've ever known. In case you wonder why anyone, least of all Slim Evans, son of the

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wild cuckoo, should bother with a bird who seems to you nothing but an ill-natured, growling, temperamental hulk, you'll find out why.

WE strolled out into the thinning morning mist, just in time to see a bright yellow monoplane hurl itself free of the ribbons of fog which wreathed it, and in a series of vertical sideslips, knife toward the ground. Duke Duval had broken a dozen speed records with that high-powered little single-seater, and the snarling drone of its motor sounded a song of reliability and power.

There was careless self-confidence and an easy assurance in the way that ship swooped out of the last slip, leveled off, fish-tailed, and landed. There was the devil-may-care recklessness of Duke Duval himself in the way he groundlooped, directly after it landed, and trundled to the line almost without using the motor at all. He was that kind of guy—even a shoestring looked different when he wore it.

Bobby acted as reception committee, while John and I stood in the background and gave the reporters a chance. I saw the lanky Duke perch himself on the side of the cockpit, cock one knee over the other, take a drink out of a bottle, pass it to the newspaper men, and light a cigarette. His aquiline face was like a smiling hawk's. Sitting there, he held court on the ship, which for the moment had become a throne. I'll swear I could feel his vitality even from where we stood. At the moment, the idea of Pacific Pilots' bankruptcy was unthinkable.

"Look at him!" growled John.—One never thought of calling Benton "Jack." He was too big and steady and dependable. Nor would it occur to one to call the Rock of Gibraltar "Gibby." Well, alongside of John Benton, Gibraltar is just a shifting sand.

"What's the matter with him," I demanded, "outside of the fact that his ship could stand a new coat of paint and that he's got on an old shirt?"

"He's like a pig in clover—every move a picture."

"Well, what of it? He's got nerve enough to be, and he does exactly as he pleases, that's all.—The quicker you quit carrying the world on your shoulders, and start tending to Number One, the better off you'll be. You're not a martyr—you're a sucker."

"Haw!" he said, with the ghost of a grin.

"Hi, Slim! How the hell are you?" Duval was calling as he walked toward us with his long-legged, effortless stride. "Look at John! How many babies did old Thunderhead eat for breakfast?"

Benton emitted one of the snorts labeled "laugh." I laughed, too, as I stepped forward to shake hands. You had to laugh whenever Duke turned on one of those grins that couldn't be resisted any more than dynamite can resist a spark.

YOU might as well get acquainted with him, while he's shaking hands with Bobby Agnew and kidding the pants off old Thunderhead, which nickname he had bestowed upon Benton when we were all instructors at Kelly Field, back in '17.

When I tote up his assets, you'll scarcely believe that his liabilities came close to neutralizing them. To the casual eye, at his birth the gods had given him everything, from a platinum spoon in his mouth to a brain that actually worked. Despite the fact that he had hair like corn silk and was the kind of

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blond a million women spend half their hours in beauty shops to be, his skin took a tan like a brunette's which made him so startlingly good looking that he was vulgarly conspicuous in any company. The orphaned son of a millionaire inventor, he had inherited one hundred thousand dollars when he was twenty-one and two hundred thousand when he was thirty. He also had a cool million waiting for him when he reached the age of forty-five. A born flyer, he'd won the Schneider Cup while in the service, and he had been sent by the army for a special course at M. I. T. There he wrote a thesis on aëro-dynamics that's still a classic. He got the material for it by inventing about twenty-five instruments, attaching them to various freakish ships, and spending about three hundred hours in the air putting planes through stresses and strains that never had been heard of before. He invented more stunts than a defeated candidate could invent alibis. By the time he left the service to take a swell job flying for an oil company, the army considered him the best flyer in the world.

This oil job involved making freak flights all over the world for publicity purposes, and he'd done about everything from sideslipping across the Sahara Desert to hedge-hopping the Alps. A cocky, swashbuckling, irresistible cookie was Mr. Rupert Duval—and he was as theatrical looking as his name sounds, and the only one of his kind.

"Well, what the hell are you doing here?" he asked me as we started for Benton's office.

"I got leave and ferried the trimotor out from Detroit for John," I told him. "What are you doing here? I thought you were set for life—?"

"The job got so it involved squiring the oil president's wife around," he grinned. "She's fifty-five and fat, so I quit."

"It's nice to be rich!" Agnew said.

"Rich, hell!" grinned the Duke. "I haven't got a dime to my name, and no way of getting one, except by paying one hundred per cent interest to loan sharks for borrowing against the next bucket of cash that comes down from the old man's estate. There are just seven dollars in my bankroll, boys; and this job looks like a million to me!"

Somehow, it didn't seem at all remarkable that at the age of thirty-five he had spent three hundred thousand dollars, in addition to a salary of at least twenty-five grand a year for the past few years. That's what I mean by his weaknesses neutralizing his amazing strong points. The woman scarcely lived who was too wealthy, too beautiful, and too popular to fall for him; and by the same token, the woman scarcely lived who was so poor and unattractive that eventually she wouldn't tell him to go to hell. Discontent was a disease with him, and neither anything nor anybody meant a thing when the curse was upon him. He left a trail of smoke behind him from coast to coast when he broke out on a drunk, and he was a gambling fool. I honestly believe that many a week he had spent twenty thousand dollars, in the process of knocking over enough bottles of whisky to drown some demon that gnawed at him.

"So this is the *sanctum sanctorum*," he said, as we entered Benton's office.

BENTON, who hadn't said a word, sank into his chair like a mountain crumbling. Duval perched himself casually on the edge of the desk, his grin shining down at the square-faced Benton.

"Now listen here, old Thunder-

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head," he said lightly. "I know you're sore as hell because you've got to give me a job for your own sake, and that you disapprove of every hair on my head and every corn on my foot—or you think you do, anyway!"

Benton grunted non-committally, his heavy-lidded eyes gazing at the sunny Duke as though John was thinking "there is such a person and he's right here with me, but I don't believe it!"

"Nevertheless and notwithstanding," Duval went on spaciously, "I'm here to do what I can for my old instructor. What man, when the world says that John Benton is nothing but a disappointed bull rhinoceros, always stands up for old Thunderhead and says at the risk of his life: 'Don't be too harsh. He's good to his mother; and once, in the year 1918, when he was drunk, I myself heard him say a kind word to a little child'?—That child is sitting right here on the desk at this moment!"

On he raved, gibing at the huge, glowering Benton who snorted, hawed, grunted and finally grinned in spite of himself as Duval's ceaseless flow of words washed down his resistance.

Then Duval changed his line of thought, as well as his appearance, and you would swear his whole personality, with one twist of the wrist. His smile disappeared as though a light had been turned off. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and his jaw seemed a little squarer, and his eyes sharper as he said crisply:

"What's the lay, John?—Walt Fowler said you were up against it. That's the reason I wired."

"Before you shoot the works," I interposed, "there's some bozo hanging around the outside office, John."

"It's Jennings," snapped Agnew. "He's always hanging around where he isn't wanted, trying to get an earful. When he isn't doing that, he's trying to run the works."

Benton grunted. "That's unfair," he said. "He's flying that picture director to Salt Lake City at seven-thirty, anyway."

"Is he one of your pilots?" Duval asked casually, as though his mind was on something else.

"Yes," piped Agnew. He looked like a perspiring kewpie. "He was a mechanic, and it seems his older brother once loaned John five bucks twenty years ago, or something like that. Anyway, John has done everything for him from teaching him to fly and giving him a job to loaning him money to buy a house. And in return for it, this Jennings thinks he ought to be running this company, and he sticks his oar in where he isn't wanted."

"John's still up to his old tricks, you see, Duke," I said. "Let's see—how many people was he supporting on the pay of a second lieutenant at Kelly Field? Five in his family, that cadet that got crippled when he and John had a wreck—"

"Shut up!" roared Benton. "Jennings is all right. He just tries too hard."

"Tries too hard, hell!" snapped Agnew. "He's always around giving orders that he's got no right or authority to give; and as far as I'm concerned, the less he knows about this company, the better. Before we begin to talk, get rid of him. Will you please, John?"

Benton nodded, called Jennings in.

THE fox-faced, bold-eyed little fellow walked in with considerable alacrity and not a little eagerness. You could see that he figured he belonged with the throne gang.

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"Go out and give your ship a good last look over, Pete," Benton said, as though he hated it. "We can't have anything more happen around here—"

"Why?" snapped Jennings, with a slight effect of talking out of the corners of his mouth. "Hell, the ship's all right.—What've we got mechanics for? Don't be such an old woman, Johnny—"

Suddenly Agnew was on his feet. His fat face was red and his eyes blazing with a fire that nearly melted his eyeglasses.

"Damn it, you've got your orders!" he yelled, in what would have been a roar if his voice had not been pitched so high. Whatever an opera tenor or a canary bird does when he yells with rage is what Agnew did then.

Jennings's head snapped back. His thin mouth widened and his black eyes snapped balefully. He was too surprised, too scared—or both—to talk. So he just sneered.

"Now get the hell out of here and attend to your business!" Agnew rushed on.

Jennings looked at the uncomfortable Benton for a moment. Benton averted his eyes, and jerked his thumb at the door.

"Go ahead, Pete," he said. "We're all just a little overwrought this morning."

"Overwrought, hell!" snapped the be-spectacled bantam rooster. "The quicker orders are orders around this place, the better chance we all have to get some place."

Jennings, sneering copiously to right and left, marched out.

"Sorry," wheezed Agnew, subsiding into a chair. "But that guy makes me sore. John, here, is so damn softhearted that if I didn't watch him the staff of this place would be a pension list, and he'd be flying the mail free, so that poor people would get their mail quicker and it wouldn't cost them anything extra."

"Haw!" observed Benton.

Then all of a sudden he grinned his first grin that morning. It was a wide gesture, which turned his heavy face into a mass of wrinkles, from eyes to chin; and it was as warm as only a plodding, sincere, whole-souled ox of a man like John Benton could have made it.

"Hard-boiled Bobby Agnew!" he rumbled. "The iron-fisted executive, the terror of shirkers, the wolf of the business world—"

"Oh, shut up!" piped Agnew, with a grin. Then he leaned forward, his eyes snapping. "Let's get down to business," he said crisply. "Don't let John fool you, Duke. You dropped out of the sky like a large chunk of manna to us poor Israelites. Our backs are to the wall, and the next few days will tell the tale."

"All right—shoot!" Duval said levelly. He was still perched casually on the edge of the desk.

Agnew looked at Benton, but Benton was staring at the wall, in a study that was more than brown—it was black.

"Well," Agnew said, "Pacific Pilots, Incorporated, after six years is bankrupt to-day. Every nickel that Benton and I could borrow has gone. Our condition is the result of the damnedest run of tough luck—if it is only luck!—that any business was ever called upon to face."

"Crack-ups, forced landings and that stuff?" Duval asked quietly.

"Right," said Agnew. "And even a safe forced landing costs a fortune when it's in the middle of the Mojave Desert."

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"You seem to infer that it may not be just hard luck," Duval suggested.

THE difference between the rangy, square-jawed, level-eyed man who sat on the desk now and the devil-may-care kidder of five minutes ago was uncanny. He generated confidence in the rest of us like a dynamo does electricity. You had the idea that he knew what it was all about, and was three jumps ahead of everything you said.

"There are many grounds, but no proof for our thinking that some one—and that some one could only be the rival airplane company here—has been seeing to it that our ships go wrong," Agnew told him. "It doesn't seem possible that so much bad luck could happen without assistance, but there's no use of going into that now. One thing is certain. The other company has seen to it that scarcely a newspaper comes out that doesn't carry either a story in it that harms us, or propaganda against us in the editorial columns. You know—stuff about not taking a chance with a company that isn't efficiently run, and comparing the reliability records of the other company and ourselves. That sort of stuff. This other outfit, the Corey Air Transport, manufactures the Corey Airplane too. They're a local industry, and heavy advertisers. They have plenty of influence. Without going into detail, they've practically run us into the ground by propaganda—plus our hard luck. And, Duke, we've had the best ships, mechanics, and pilots that money could buy. Even Jennings is a good flyer. No ships or motors were ever inspected more thoroughly than ours; but our record is lousy."

Duval just nodded.

"So we decided to shoot the works," Agnew went on. "Our credit was nil, because the Corey outfit spread the news that we were practically bankrupt. The public thought of us as a struggling, second-rate outfit rapidly going to the wall. So, we've hocked everything we've got, and bought this Ward Tri-Motor for two reasons. We think we can make money out of it flying cargoes to Salt Lake City every day. Over the Mojave Desert, it saves a day and a half on the train. Second, it is to show the world that we've got money—that we're progressive—and to rehabilitate Pacific Pilots in the eyes of the public."

Again Duval nodded. He was taking it all in, like a sponge does water. Outside, the Liberty motor in the ship that Jennings was to fly was drumming along on the warm-up.

"Now, the situation is this," Agnew continued, glancing at the motionless, brooding Benton. "You probably know that International Airways are extending their line to the coast. They've got a man in Los Angeles right now, who is going to buy out either Corey or ourselves and add terminal and mail contracts to their own. Whichever company is absorbed is on easy street; its executives will become part of the continental chain, and organization and everything else is swell. We're the more desirable buy—in everything but reputation. When I say that, I mean Benton's reputation as an executive, and the company's reputation for reliability. Our airdrome is more conveniently located, and a lot of other things are in our favor, including our mail contracts. But our reputation pretty nearly damns us. We believe, though, that if nothing else goes wrong, we can put over the deal."

"I see," Duval said thoughtfully. "If you can be absorbed, you get your

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money back with a good profit, and John's future in the flying game is assured and all that. If things go wrong, you're broke; you and your company are flops, your dough is sunk, and you're through."

"In fact," I put in, "it's worse than that. Bobby's wife will fry him in oil!"

Suddenly Benton lumbered to his feet. "Let's go outside," he said abruptly.

I knew that he just had to move, to keep from flying to pieces. When a solid rock like John shimmies on its foundations, the trouble is neither a tremor nor a Frisco fire. It's an earthquake.

CHAPTER II.

PUT UP JOB.

AS we walked out through the hangar, past the big ship, Benton passed on ahead, as though he wanted to be alone. The Douglas was taking off. The passenger was Donald Grayson, one of the more famous Hollywood directors. He was so anxious to get to Reno he just felt he couldn't wait.

"If we can only click now, we've got a chance, see?" Agnew was saying to Duke. "On the strength of your piloting the first trip, we've got a lot of publicity already, and a first cargo that includes everybody from the mayor to May Sully, the picture star. And if you could stick around for at least a month as a pilot, the whole world would have to admit that Pacific Pilots are an up and coming concern."

Suddenly Benton whirled on us. His face was set, his dark eyes turbulent.

"For Lord's sake, quit begging!" he exploded hotly. "We're not asking for charity! If Duval stays, we'll pay him his salary, and he won't stay unless he figures that it's to his own advantage!"

For a second there was an astonished silence at this volcanic eruption. Then Duval found his tongue, which he rarely if ever lost.

"Why don't you bite yourself and get hydrophobia?" he inquired. "That'd put you out of your misery."

"Good idea!" I snorted. "John, this rough diamond stuff don't go in a modern setting. And as long as you're getting so damn nasty, it's only fair to remind you that it's mostly Bobby Agnew's dough you're playing with. Listen here. You quit letting your dumb, bull-headed, thick-skulled likes and dislikes interfere with the business of this company—or I'll be damned if I won't kick the tar out of you myself!"

Benton just stood there, his head lowered as though he was a bull about to charge, his black eyes glowing redly, his seamed face working. Then, all of a sudden, he seemed to crumple.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and turned as though to hide his face from us.

"He hasn't eaten or slept right for months," Agnew whispered, and I took off on a kangaroo-like hop which landed me alongside John.

"Sorry, old-timer, but you had it coming to you. For God's sake, quit letting Duval be a—an obsession—"

"I know I'm crazy," he growled gruffly, but I suspected there were tears in his eyes. "But I'm not so crazy that I don't know he's a grandstander without any—er—stability or anything. It makes me sore to have him swagger in here, as though he thought he was the savior of the company, and have to beg him to help out—"

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"That's not it!" I protested. "It's a grand arrangement all around. He's broke—"

"WELL, if that isn't nerve!" This was a rude interruption from Mr. John Benton as simultaneously our eyes caught a Tri-Motor Corey transport which was trundling into the line. It had landed without our being aware of it.

My own peepers protruded gently as I watched a short, roly-poly pilot descend from the enemy's ship and waddle toward us with his short, fat legs wide apart and his round, battered face made even rounder and fatter by the fact that his hair had been shaved off close to his head since the last time I had seen him.

"Do you happen to know that bozo?" I asked quickly.

He was bound for us—a cocky grin on his face and his slit-like eyes crinkled merrily.

"Sure, that's Tubby McFane, test pilot for Corey," Benton grunted. "Got some stock in the company too, I believe. Why?"

"Because," I whispered raucously, "when I was in Detroit he or his twin brother seemed to be working for the Ward Company."

Benton shook his head. "No, he was just visiting," he said. "He's been away for a couple of weeks picking up some dope, probably."

"Hi there," McFane piped in a throaty wheeze. "I was making a test flight, so I thought I'd drop in and see the big doings. Hello, Evans."

"You didn't tell me you belonged out here," I remarked.

I had just barely met him around the Ward field in Detroit.

"Nobody asked me," he grinned.

His face and body gave the impression of being made of so much rock, despite the fact that to the casual eye he looked fat. His face, for instance, was a full moon, but he didn't have a sign of a double chin. What there was of his neck was like a wrestler's, but it was so short that his head seemed to be set directly on his huge shoulders.

"From what I hear of what Corey's been doing to this outfit, I'd probably never have started flying the Tri-Motor out here if I'd known who you were," I told him.

He grinned his hard, bright grin. "Nothing like that," he wheezed airily. "Hell, we've got this outfit licked to a standstill. A Tri-Motor ain't gonna save it!"

He was as impudently cocky as a bedraggled sparrow, and he actually looked somewhat like a beefy specimen of that well-known bird. His breeches and boots were soaked with oil; his khaki shirt had cost about a dollar and a half ten years before, and had gone through so many washings that it was ragged. With the bristles on his bullet head to top off the ensemble, he seemed to be a unique—not to say extraordinary—stockholder in nothing more valuable than a pot of hobo mulligan.

"You came over to lend tone to the affair, I presume," I said. "Do you let Corey men stick around, John?"

"I reckon they've done all they can," Benton stated.

"Oh, hell no!" McFane said with a wave of one stumpy arm. "We haven't even begun yet. You may linger for a moment, Benton old socks, but we'll get you at the finish—"

"GOOD God!" The curse was jarred loose from me. At the far end of the field, the Douglas was wobbling perilously—stalled in a steep climb.

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A well-rounded oath which was like the boom of a big gun shot from between Benton's bloodless lips. An instant later the nose of the Douglas snapped down. A half turn in a slow spin, the ship outlined against the background of the Sierras, and it plunged from sight behind a low hill. As John and I leaped toward his battered old car, there came the crackling, ripping sound of the wreck.

Some of the reporters were still around, working on Duke's bottle. Along with Agnew and Duval, they all hit the back seat of the car at once. I never said a word—I couldn't—as John sent it careening over the field. His heavy shoulders were hunched over the wheel, and his face was a pallid, pain-lined mask as he stared wordlessly ahead of me. I took one look back at the line. McFane was standing there, hands on hips, his astonished face beaming with simple pleasure and delight.

The chattering newspapermen made the picture all too clear in my mind. Grayson was front page stuff all over the country if he was badly hurt, or killed. It looked as though that wreck was the period ending the last sentence to be written about Pacific Pilots, Incorporated.

On foot we streamed over the low rolling hill, with me in the lead. I'm six feet six inches tall, and one foot of that is neck. The rest is legs. When I start making speed on my natural stilts, I progress in a series of kangaroo-like leaps and bounds that cover ground ungracefully, but fast.

One look was enough. A heap of débris, mercifully not on fire, and two motionless bodies. Grayson was still in the rear cockpit; Jennings half out of the front one. The tail of the Douglas was thrust in the air, as though the ship was trying to show us what was wrong with it.

As I galloped down the slope with my heart in my mouth, my popping optics took in something that made my hair curl and my mouth get dry. Both small cabane struts, one on each elevator, to which the control wires were attached, had been torn loose from their moorings.

I made a whirling dervish look like a statue as I ran forward, and at the same time turned sideways to yell my information to the others. I traveled down that hill like a cross between a crab and a kangaroo, with gestures. I was excited. Maybe, right here, the mystery of Pacific Pilots would be cracked, for here was sabotage unashamed.

Behind me, led by Duke Duval, came the bunch, like wolves baying on a trail.

I WAS sublimely oblivious to both the unconscious movie director and the wounded pilot. I hove anchor alongside the tail surfaces. Not so John Benton. He was lifting the two unconscious men from their cockpits as Duval, Agnew and I, backed by the newspapermen, looked at these struts.

"See!" I yelped. "The nuts attached to the bolts that held these in place were removed! There wasn't a way in the world to control the diving and climbing angles of the ship—and the nuts didn't come off by themselves!"

"Right!" Duval exploded. "And by God, the only people in the world who'd have any interest in doing this are Corey Air Transport!"

"No, no!"

It was a roar from Benton, overwhelming the questions which came like machine gun fire from the reporters.

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He had the bodies on the ground, and we all turned our attention to them. Up to that moment, Grayson had never been the object of so little attention in his life.

"Dead?" barked Duval.

"No," Benton snapped back at him, his barrel-like chest heaving and his face a study in bewildered misery. "Listen, boys! We can't accuse Corey of this.—We've got no proof." He whirled on the newspapermen. "Not a word about the Corey outfit, understand?"

He was the kind of goof who'd stop the Twentieth Century to keep from running over a grasshopper.

By this time, casual onlookers around the airdrome, and a delegation of mechanics, were puffing over the top of the hill.

"There's something about this that smells to high heaven," I told the assembled congregation swiftly. "A blind man would have noticed it if all these bolts had no nuts on them before the ship took off, so the nuts must have been there before she took off."

"But the threads on the bolts are all right," a newspaperman pointed out. "If the nuts were not screwed down at least a little distance, anybody could have seen that something was wrong; and if they were screwed down, even a couple of threads, there's no way in the world that they could all come loose at once."

"Just to make sure," piped another one, "let's see if we can find any nuts around here."

About half the news hawks started searching around and backtracking on the trail of the Douglas, while the rest of us finally deigned to pay some attention to the two unconscious passengers.

Jennings had a very nasty gash over his temple, and it was bleeding with enthusiasm. It looked as though the shock had snapped his head against the projecting compass on the instrument board. Grayson was just knocked cold, with no observable injury except a rising lump on the brow, which hid his allegedly massive brain.

Jennings was the first to come to. His eyelids flickered, and he looked from one to the other of us.

"Am I hurt bad?" he asked weakly.

"All okay except that nasty head," Benton told him. He was feeling as badly as though the two men had been crippled for life.

"What happened?" I asked.

Jennings tried to sit up, and then fell back as though he didn't have a bit of strength in him. It struck me that he was putting it on a little, although that was a very gory blow on the head he'd got.

"We were climbing," he said hesitatingly. "Then all of a sudden the controls wouldn't work. The nose dropped, and when I pulled back on the stick nothing happened. So we just hit, and that's all I know."

WE told him what had happened to the ship, and he started cursing like a madman. Just then Grayson came to—talking. He damned everything and everybody, from the Wright Brothers to anybody who might be simple enough to fly in the year 2000. Finally, just as Grayson had decided to sue the Benton and Agnew Company for assault, battery, conspiracy, and being accessories before, during, and after the fact, we started for the hangars. Grayson certainly did want to get to Reno. I couldn't decide whether he had a girl that was being divorced that morning and who might marry somebody else if he didn't meet her at the court house,

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or whether he couldn't wait to be rid of his wife.

We were all pretty silent as we tramped across the field. The crowd was already gathering on the line to watch the big bugs take off on the Tri-Motor's first official flight; and the sight of them streaming across the field to get a look at the wreck, or milling excitedly on the line, did not improve my disposition any. I was making an earnest effort to think, which always gets me into trouble. I went to extremes, and the labor of my mountainous cerebrations finally brought forth the following mouse:

"Not a nut in sight, at least of the variety used in connection with bolts. It's just barely possible that the nuts were removed before the ship started. If that was so, it would mean two things. The mechanic in charge would be a murderous crook and also a lunatic. There are four million separate and distinct ways to put a ship on the fritz, any or all of which are more effective than the one that was used. Furthermore, it is practically impossible that it wasn't noticed. Any man who thought he could get away with it would be a lunatic. It just doesn't make sense."

"I'll swear everything was all right when I took off," Jennings said in his rasping voice. "Hell, if they'd stripped the threads so that the nuts would snap off or something like that, you could understand it."

"The whole thing just couldn't happen—and yet it has," Benton said slowly.

"Serves me right," blared Grayson nastily. "The whole West Coast knows what this outfit is, and I had to be a sucker as usual and take a chance with 'em!"

I could fairly feel Benton wince when he said that, but there wasn't a single word anybody could say.

THE next hour was more or less of a scrambled mess, and Benton stalked through it like a man walking in his sleep. There were detectives, cops and newspapermen, and a growing mob of people, who were licking their lips over their good luck in escaping. If Jennings and Grayson had been killed, it would have been a perfect day for the crowd. Last but not least, there were the celebrities themselves. A million rumors, more or less, were flying through the air, and almost everybody, from the president of the Corey Air Transport Company to the man that cleaned out the spittoons in their offices, came hustling over to the airdrome with a lawyer in tow. McFane swaggered around, shedding sweetness and light, and chuckling to himself. His gall was so colossal that I almost liked him.

Duval, who had said scarcely a word, and Benton and Agnew and myself, all swarmed over the big Tri-Motor, peeking owlishly at every wire and stalking the last cotterpin to its lair.

Down on the ground, Barney Hutchison, a gangling picture press agent who was handling publicity for the occasion, just out of friendship, was threatening, cajoling, pleading and kidding a bunch of upset picture flappers and worried politicians into going through with the flight they'd lost all stomach for.

I was just one jump ahead of the booby hatch. I knew as sure as I was six and a half feet tall, that the whole dumb, unbelievable, ruinous near tragedy had some simpler explanation. I was going nuts because I almost had my mental finger on it a thousand times, only to discover that it had

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popped away from me like a drop of mercury when you plant your thumb on it.

"The hell of it is," I wailed to Duval, "if we could clean it up it would clear the whole air, as far as the company and Benton are concerned. Explain this, and the public would think everything was explained."

Duval nodded, his gray eyes cloudy with abstracted thought. We were sitting in the control cabin, having just finished a close examination of the several dozen gadgets therein. The instrument board of a Tri-Motor has indicators enough to furnish the engine room of the Leviathan.

More to give my mind a rest than anything else, I said casually:

"It was damn nice of you to fly all the way out here to do this for John."

He shook his head. "The pleasure is mine," he said sardonically. Then, more seriously, "You know, it's a funny thing how old friends gradually turn out to be best. The longer I live and the more I bat around as sort of a—a big shot, in a way, the bigger the old gang that raised hell at Kelly and around Nancy and Paris get. Sort of a nest of regulars that you know are regulars in the midst of a gang of phonies or fair weather bootlickers. If I got in a spot, it would be one of the old mob that I hadn't seen for five years I'd go to for help. And I'd go to Siberia on roller skates if one of 'em called on me."

I NODDED. I knew just what he meant.

"And don't mind old John," I told him. "You know him. Half of what's the matter with him is that he's so grateful to you that he's sore at asking anybody to do so big a favor for him."

Duval grinned sunnily. "There isn't anything about me he approves of," he chuckled, "and he can't understand how I get away with it, or why he likes me underneath, or anything else. That makes him sore."

"He'd do a lot better for himself if he imitated you a little more, and you might amount to something if you absorbed some of his steadiness," I remarked. "John's a long-suffering sucker, and you're a damned fool."

Duval grinned, as though dismissing the subject, and hailed an early civilian who was walking past the ship; walking flat-footedly to show he was a detective. The Duke and I were sitting in the lofty control cabin, having just finished an exhaustive investigation of the gadgets therein. Duval raised the window and said:

"Did you find out anything yet? Any of the nuts found, for instance?"

The detective spat. "No," he said. "I'd think the whole thing was a put up job if two men wasn't nearly killed."

"Did you get anywhere with the Corey people?"

The three hundred pound sleuth spat again.

"Nothing except getting damn near killed by old man Corey himself," he grinned. "If a guilty conscience is its own accuser, he's guilty as hell!"

Barney Hutchison emerged from the crowd. A lot of motion picture cameras and microphones had been set up, and he flung his feet fluently to right and left as he walked in our direction.

"Come on, Duval. These punks are going through with it!" he yelped. "Comb your hair and prepare to look at the little birdie."

I climbed out too and took as inconspicuous a place as possible in the

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rear of the mob. I didn't want to be questioned. However, on account of my height, looking for me is like seeking Cleopatra's needle in a haystack.

So it was that a gray-haired man, all decked out in a cutaway coat, hove to alongside me. I was watching Benton, his face like a death's head, trying to smile and indulge in casual badinage with Duke Duval for the benefit of the cameras. Bobby Agnew, his fat face woebegone, completed the trio in the first shot. He looked as though he was listening to some pointed accusation from his wife. These men had been ruined in the last few minutes; and as I watched them perform for a publicity shot which they probably would never need, I was not in any mood calculated to make me greet my new neighbor effusively.

"Lieutenant Evans, I believe," stated the distinguished looking duck.

"The same," I said.

"You will find it to your interest to appear at my office this afternoon," he said, and handed me a card. "As attorney for the Corey Air Transport Company, I am taking immediate steps either to rectify the damage done to my clients by certain unfounded and reckless statements accusing my clients of a murderous conspiracy. These statements are false, and my clients desire satisfaction from the men who have uttered them—of which men you are one. You will find it, as I said, to your interest not to ignore the appointment for three o'clock at my office."

He bowed crisply and stalked away.

I WANDERED around like a crane with the croup after that, not paying any attention to anything or anybody. I was in a cross between a daze and a trance. The newspapermen were getting stewed at a buffet in the hangar, and I found out later that the cameramen had taken pictures of everything around the place.

I came to when the three radial motors of the Ward started to sing. With Duke Duval at the controls, it taxied out on the field before a crowd of at least two thousand eager people. Now, if Pacific Pilots, Inc., would only supply a real triple-X, all-star crack-up in the Tri-Motor, all would be well and the goose hanging high. And I'll be damned if I didn't have a feeling they might get what they came for. I was in a highly unsettled mental condition. That Douglas wreck had me spinning like a top, emitting plaintive cries for help at every spin.

I guess I took a subconscious photograph of the scene while I was watching the Ward trundle along the ground. It had a cargo of Hollywood frails whose boy friends were important executives, and also three of the largest and loudest political windbags on the coast. Also, four half-stewed newspapermen. On the line a D.H., with a camera mounted in it, was warming up. A battered Jenny which belonged to Jennings also had its motor running. I saw Grayson, the director, squeezing another publicity yarn out of his wreck, to which a reporter was paying no attention. Jennings, a theatrical looking bandage around his bean, was trying to date up some picture dame's maid. Bewhiskered and red-eyed old Corey still spitting forth fire from his nostrils, and Benton and Agnew were watching the ship as though it was carrying their last hope of heaven away. The detectives looked wise underneath their snap-brimmed hats, stood around and smoked cigars.

There was a half-hearted cheer as

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the big, shining all-metal ship took the air. It had majesty, that aërial railroad train; and if it and its kind foreshadowed the end of the days when a man would have saucy little scouts which he could hang on his back in the sky in, what of it? Flyers would be chauffeurs, ships just another way of getting around.

Then my heart skipped a beat. Four hundred feet high over the eastern edge of the field, with nothing but a vacant lot ahead which was covered with heaps of débris, there came a false note in the roaring diapason of power which rolled and thundered from the three motors.

I just stood there as the Tri-Motor went into a bank and came back toward the field. Only two motors were functioning—one of them had died. I swore—and then my lips froze and my tongue got numb and my heart skipped two beats. A second motor had cut out . . .

Then my ticker ceased beating altogether. The third motor had popped, sputtered once or twice, and died.

CHAPTER III.

CONFESSIONS.

THE Ward was half around in its bank. There was not altitude enough to permit Duke to complete the circle and spiral down into the field. He straightened her, and down she glided toward the rough terrain straight ahead—ten tons of ship, and two tons of celebrity flesh, bound for as sure a wreck as ever faced an unfortunate airman.

I got control of myself to find, to my intense surprise, that I was half way to the scene of the coming disaster. Back of me were shouts and screams and mad confusion. And behind me, thudding footsteps.

I saw the Ward land perfectly on a little level patch. It rolled a few feet. A man could tell that Duke Duval was handling it, for one wheel swung around an ash heap, missing it by inches. For an anguished five seconds I thought he would do the impossible. But it really was impossible. Ahead of him was a low knoll of ashes and assorted rubbish. The lordly ship climbed up one side, and slid down the other on its snoot. Struts and spars gave way with a rending, tearing sound.

There it rested, like a king with his head in a barrel of glue; and from it poured screams and shrieks and curses. When I was a hundred yards away they started popping out of it like so many kittens poured from a bag. I knew that no one could be badly hurt, unless some dame whose husband carried accident insurance had kicked him in the face.

I slowed down to get myself together; and newspapermen and detectives streamed past me like light past a snail, then the mob. If I had possessed a mirror I'd have taken a careful look at myself to see whether I was wearing a false mustache, and I did do considerable self-examination before I decided definitely that I was awake.

No conceivable combination of causes could explain the failure of three motors at one and the same time—except deliberate sabotage. And not for an hour or a minute had the ship that had carried me without a murmur from Detroit to Los Angeles been left unguarded and alone.

I saw Benton and Agnew in the center of a seething mob. Actresses were polishing up their hysterics, politicians were giving their lungs a work-out,

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and one newspaperman was trying to control his stomach. I lingered. I didn't want to hit the center of the crowd yet. I was stupefied.

By the time I was shouldering through the crowd, about seventeen cops, in and out of uniform, were acting sore because they didn't have any excuse to use their clubs. Duke Duval, his forehead cut by flying glass, was the center of a group which included three detectives and Benton and Agnew.

The cameras had already arrived by boat and by train. The accident would be spread across the front pages of every afternoon paper in America within an hour. The unhurt but rumpled actresses were already throwing fits all over the garbage heaps. Between their press agents, the damage suits and the fan magazines, their narrow escapes from death would be news long after Pacific Pilots, Inc., was a thing of the past.

I WAS ten feet from the group which centered around the Duke, when I heard Benton cry, as though it was wrenched from him:

"Good God, man, think what you're saying!"

"I'm not crazy!" snarled Duval. "That's the whole thing, officer. Now where do we go?"

"Step aside, please!" yapped a cameraman, and while three or four men carrying microphones at the ends of wires raced up to Duval, the cameramen themselves were peeking through their rangefinders. When the world comes to an end, Hollywood cameramen will have a picture of it.

"Just tell your story!" one commanded.

That was as good a way to get it as any, and as the crowd fell silent under the commands of the news cameramen, I didn't attempt to join the white-faced owners of the company. Everybody listened tensely, while a group of dicks mumbled wisely to themselves, just to show that ordinary rules didn't apply to them.

Duval, the blood clotted on his forehead, but handsome as the devil, with the California sun—you've heard of California's special sun?—glinting in his tumbled blond hair, swung his helmet and goggles and said clearly:

"It is important that the public realize that this unfortunate accident should not be considered a blot upon the safety of flying, as such. Neither is it chargeable to any carelessness or oversight on the part of anybody, except myself."

He paused briefly. A premonition of what was to come swept over me.

"The truth of the matter is this: Pacific Pilots, Incorporated, bought this most modern and safe of ships to give the public better service and hired me, at great trouble and expense to themselves, because of my long experience as a flyer. In order to get here to fly it, I was forced to fly most of the night. Frankly, I took many—too many—drinks in order to keep up.

"I thought they had not affected me. After we had taken off, one motor sputtered and seemed about to die. I started to turn back into the field for a landing, which I could have made easily and safely. In my befogged condition, it suddenly seemed to me that there was some danger attached to trying to get back into the airdrome; and so I landed straight ahead, on rough terrain, and the ship nosed up.

"It was simply an error in judgment on my part, due to my sleepless condition and the fact that I had had too much to drink. I am the sole culprit—

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the Ward plane and the mechanics of Pacific Pilots are blameless."

WELL, gents, I just stood there and gasped. I stared at the composed Duval, whose snooty countenance was decorated with a sardonic smile. He saw me, and there was the suspicion of a wink as he turned to the detectives. Then I leaped ahead as though somebody'd jabbed a needle into me. Here was the climax of the yarn—Rupert Duval, wined and dined and decorated for his flying achievements all over the world, flying a priceless cargo while drunk.

The crowd was buzzing and chattering and suggesting everything from lynching to another drink for the poor boy. What faced him was jail for a long, long time. He was now surrounded by detectives, and Benton and Agnew were charging up from the other side, when I stretched out a long and sinewy arm and spun him around.

"Listen, you star-spangled jackass. Those motors cut out!" I said swift and low, but the dicks could hear. "Don't try to fool me. And if you're drunk, I'm dying of dandruff!"

"Shut up!" he snapped in my ear. "Of course they did—and of course I'm not."

The detectives, in all the excitement, let me drag him a few feet away, just as Agnew and Benton arrived all in a lather.

"Now nobody say a word!" Duval snapped. "If I take the blame for a while it may save the company some criticism. If none of the passengers could see that I was drunk, John and Bobby here can't be blamed if they didn't know it either. Arrange to get me bail, Bobby. And you, John, for the love of God snap into it and find out what was wrong with that ship! Get wise to yourself!—Quit taking punches and pass out a few."

"Come on, boys, we've got to get going," said a dick who acted as though he wasn't sure whether he was drunk or sober himself.

"I'm going, too," Benton roared. "Bobby and I'll fix up bail some way. You take charge here, Slim, until I get back."

And off they went hustling to the District Attorney's office as though that gentleman might die before they got there.

IT'S happened many times in my life that when my back is to the wall and there doesn't seem to be a single way out, I have suddenly thought of a dozen things to do, and have done them. Necessity can generate more stratagems, and more nerve to carry them out, than a man would believe he possessed under normal circumstances.

Right at that second, as my bloodshot eye fell upon Jennings, a few spare parts in my mind clicked into place, and for the first time I got my teeth into a real idea. All the thinking I had been doing in the last hour had finally put forth a fruit. And I was positive that I had hit on the only explanation possible for the wreck of the D.H. A second later I was looming over the half defiant, half frightened Jennings.

"Get over to the office right away!—You and me are going to have a talk!" I snarled.

Jennings started to say something flip, but I must have had a baleful look in my eye.

"Don't open your mouth!" I snapped at him, "unless you want a detective to tap you on the shoulder right now. I know all about that wreck of yours; and while you're hustling over to the office, you'd better start

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praying that I don't change my mind about giving you a chance to save yourself. Come on, get going out of this mob!"

Well, he got going without a word; and it seemed to me that the speed with which he put one foot before another, together with the hunch of his shoulders, were all the confession I needed.

I don't exactly remember the next minute or so, except that I was frolicking about answering a dozen questions a minute, and arranging that the Ward be guarded and that no one be allowed to touch it for any reason whatsoever. I didn't have an idea about what had happened to it then, but I did know that somewhere there was an explanation for three motors cutting out at once, and that the man responsible under the circumstances would make an ordinary murderer, satisfied with one victim at a time, seem like one of the better Samaritans.

At the back of my mind I was constantly chewing over the sudden idea that had sprouted in my mind about Jennings and the D.H.

Anyway, after a minute or so of somewhat violent activity, I left the gibbering crowd and started splitting the breezes across the field toward the office. Jennings, who was proceeding in the same direction like an antelope trying to outfoot a bullet, was close to the line when I started. I hadn't set eyes on McFane, but the transport was still on the line. And who did I see coming toward me but the be-whiskered Corey and his frock-coated lawyer. Victory was in their eyes, and the lawyer took occasion to throw a little greeting to me.

"What are you accusing us of now?" he inquired.

I changed the direction of my charge and swerved toward them. Every once in so often—and this was one of the times—I get wound up so tight that it's impossible to keep me from sounding the alarm. Try to keep this cuckoo inside his clock when he feels the hour has come to sound off. So, regardless of consequences, I exploded as follows:

"I'll tell you what we're accusing you of! Sabotage for one thing—and we'll have the proof within an hour. What we've got proof of already is deliberate propaganda, in the newspapers of this town and by word of mouth, to destroy this business. And we're taking action on it to-day. If you don't believe it, get Barney Hutchison—he's around here somewhere—to tell you what friendly reporters have told him.—And you listen to me, Corey! You'll need a better mouthpiece than you've got, or than anybody else ever had. You're being charged with conspiracy and every other thing that the best lawyer in this town can figure out."

EXCITED people, streaming in both directions, had stopped to listen. I shot past them so fast that the breeze waved Corey's whiskers. The lawyer's jaw dropped so far the glasses almost fell off his nose, and two reporters almost split themselves in two as one leg itched to take after us and the other one stayed planted to get a statement out of Corey. It would not be more than two minutes before that whole crowd knew about my outburst, and I didn't give a damn.

Again I took off across the field. Practically nobody was left on the line, and I was doing so much heavy thinking that I wasn't noticing anything. None of my thoughts were about the Ward—they were all about Jennings and the DeHaviland. If I put my fingers on that, I was sure that the ex-

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planation of the Ward could be extracted from, beaten out of, or otherwise obtained from, Jennings.

Then, as I steamed along in a fog, at several knots an hour, a motor roared into life. I looked stupidly at the line, to see Jennings's battered old ship taxiing swiftly out on the field. I wasn't twenty-five yards from it.

"He knows I'm wise to him!" I yelped aloud, and as I yelped I leaped.

The most important thing in the whole world right then was a confession from him. His running away was that confession in itself, but I needed it in detail.

As I streaked toward the line, I had no conscious plan except to get into the air. Mexico was only a hundred miles away, and Jennings lacking nerve to stand the gaff, would almost certainly be planning to disappear over the border.

There was not a soul on the line. Everybody was at the wreck. But I knew that the motor of that camera ship was warmed up. I didn't know what I'd do when I got into the air, but I aimed to get there.

Jennings was trundling swiftly across the ground, taxiing to the end of the field, so that he would have the full length of it in order to take off against the wind. His ship was so low-powered that he didn't dare take a chance on anything but the full field. What did he care if he was overtaken in the air? There weren't any ships with guns on them. I knew that as well as he did. But I had the wild idea that something could be done.

A MECHANIC was running to meet me as I reached the ship and leaped into the cockpit. Jennings had reached the end of the field and was about to turn for the take-off.

"Crank it!" I yelled. "Contact!"

The grease monkey swung the propeller, and it started on the first try as I shoved the self starter at the same time. I advanced the motor as Jennings was turning for the take-off. The D.H. began to move. Slimuel X. Evans, the Terror of the West Coast, was off to the rescue—the Son of the Wild Cuckoo was about to swoop. Lord, it must have been funny!

The ship was moving ahead, directly out from the hangars, and Jennings had started his take-off across the field at right angles to my course. I roared straight across the field and for the point where the course of the two ships would intersect. If Jennings got away, it would be the end of the hopes of John and Bobby—to say nothing of what Bobby's spouse would say!

I don't think Jennings knew what was in my mind, but I did—for once. The D.H., its wheels still on the ground and its nose down, was like an animal charging. It was thirty feet from the slower Jenny when the smaller ship got its wheels off the ground. As it angled upward, I shifted the bellowing D.H.'s course slightly, swinging her toward the Jenny. Like a tiger leaping at a sheep with a twelve-cylinder snarl, the D.H. left the ground.

Ten feet above the ground, the propeller and radiator tore into the Jenny's tail surfaces. I thought the world had blown up when the propeller shattered. The two ships skidded through the air. When they hit the ground it was like the sudden eruption of a volcano, and St. Peter must have had his mouth open to say "No." To my intense surprise, I remained alive. In a daze, I realized that the crowd was leaving the line and rushing toward the wreck.

But I had work to do before they ar-

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rived. I uncoiled myself and pulled Jennings out of the other plane. We had a short but extremely pertinent conversation. I think he really thought I'd kill him with the monkey wrench that was in my hand.

Just then the motors of the Corey transport started to roar.

"Now, you yellow-bellied punk, you are going to talk or I'll brain you!" I barked at him before the sweating crowd got there. "We know you jimmed up the controls of your ship after the wreck, and you're coming over to the office with me and sign a complete confession right now!—Come on, get going!"

He was a shivering, shaking wreck, prepared to admit that he was Al Capone in disguise or that he'd shot McKinley when a boy. The mob arrived, with their tongues hanging out. They had rushed to so many places on the field that they were like a pack of hounds that had just come across a rabbit convention. It was a job for an All-American football team to get through them, and of course everybody there connected the recent slight collision and the expressions on our pans, with the unique happenings of the morning. But I refused comment.

BACK at the hangar, I put two mechanics on the door of the office and turned to confront my cowering captive.

"All right," I said. "This morning you did some punk flying. I say punk flying because I don't think you've got nerve enough deliberately to wreck a ship. Grayson was knocked out, but you weren't. You beat it around to the back of the ship, jimmed up those controls to make it look like the wreck was an accident, and then beat it back to your cockpit and pretended to be knocked out. Now, why the hell did you do it?"

"I wanted to—alibi my bum—flying," he stammered.

"The hell you say!" I snarled. "That may be part of the reason. Who's paying you for hurting this company? Admit that it's Corey Transport, you louse!"

"They offered to a long while ago, and I never did anything," he raved, half crying.

"Oh, yeah?—Who's the man who made you the proposition?" I demanded, shaking him until his toe nails snapped.

"Tubby McFane," he said chokingly.

At that moment I heard the transport taking off, and I knew that the tough Tubby was on his way from there.

"Just what was the proposition?" I asked him, casually whistling the wrench I still had in my hand past his nose.

"A long time ago he hinted that if I could find a chance to do anything to the ships, I'd get paid well for it," he stammered. He was so weak I hated him.

"Why didn't you come to the man who's been keeping you, you double-crossing rat, and tell him?"

"Because I hate Agnew's nerve! He's always picking on me!" flared this priceles specimen of a flyer. "Besides, it wasn't very definite; and you couldn't prove anything on McFane, the way he put it up—"

"I see!"

I asked him a few more questions as I galloped up and down the office, and the net information I extracted was that a few months before McFane had made some vague passes at Jennings and had hinted—really nothing

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more than that—at the fact that he, Tubby McFane, stockholder in Corey Transport, would be highly pleased at any bad luck that overtook Pacific Pilots, Inc., and might pay a reward for same. Then I devoted five minutes of threats, cajolery and cross examination of divers sorts to the proposition of the Ward wreck.

Jennings shouted, wept, mumbled, and sobbed his denial that he knew anything at all about it, and I was compelled to believe him.

"All right," I said finally. "You sit down at that typewriter there and write out a full confession of the D.H. wreck, and word for word, as far as you can remember, about what McFane said to you. There's just one chance in a thousand that you may escape going to jail for this. We won't decide that until the boys get back. Now get busy!"

Busy he got, pecking laboriously at the keys as I resumed my canter up and down the office. I hadn't got as much out of him as I'd expected, but it was something.

ALL of a sudden my thoughts veered to the Ward. Three motors cutting out simultaneously presented a problem so amazing that it should be comparatively simple because the explanations could be so few. Their separate ignition systems could not have gone hell, west and crooked all at once. They were, however, all fed from the same gas tank. So up and down I plodded, trying to think; and at the end of my cogitations I left Jennings under the guardianship of two mechanics and a puzzled flatfoot while I went out into the open and gave the chief mechanic some orders, after looking over some parts of the ship.

I got back to the office and the moaning Jennings just in time to see him sign his confession, and just a minute or two before Messrs. Duval, Benton and Agnew arrived in a cloudburst of conversation.

"Well, that's quick work!" I said as they charged in.

"Twenty thousand dollars bail, but the boys got it," grinned Duval.

"Which was lucky," snorted Benton, "or I'd be tearing down the jail this minute!"

I looked at the big fellow quickly, and then at Duval. Duval winked ever so slightly. No words were necessary to explain how Benton felt, but they were spoken nevertheless. Benton said what he had to say with dogged determination, as though it was a necessity to put himself on record.

"I am saying to you publicly what I have already said to Bobby and the Duke," he said slowly. "I'm nothing but a damn fool, disliking people for no reason; and any time the Duke wants me to lie down and be a doormat for him, you'll find me on the floor."

"Don't be silly," scoffed Duval. "It isn't going to be half as tough as I thought and when the truth comes out, look what a big shot I'll be! Big hero—and it hasn't cost me a nickel, or even a day in jail."

"But you didn't know that when you said your piece, and it may not be true," Benton insisted.

"Well, you boys can conduct a mutual admiration society at some more propitious time," I told them. "Cock a snook at this confession, lads, while the rat who wrote it is right here to fill in any gaps."

Outside, an angry mob was still seething around, and a few dicks and cops were getting sore because they knew something was going on that they

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weren't in on. Nobody gave them a tumble, however, as they peered through the glass window of the door while Duval read the confession aloud. Jennings was slumped on a chair in a corner, gazing blankly at the wall, with his jaw quivering every once in a while.

"I knew it!" exploded the peppery Agnew. "I knew he was a louse and I'll be damned if I don't—"

He began to tell Jennings what he thought of him; and whenever he ran out of breath, Duke Duval put in a well chosen cuss-word.

SUDDENLY Benton lumbered to his feet.

"That's enough!" he blared as he walked toward the shaking Jennings. "The kid did wrong and he's thoughtless, but he isn't as bad as all that—"

The big lummox was patting Jennings on the shoulder by that time, as though to comfort him; and that was the last straw. Jennings broke down and cried as I've never heard anybody cry before or since. Not a word was said, and those sobs seemed to shake the walls of the room. It was damned uncomfortable, and all of a sudden the shoe was on the other foot and I felt like a louse.

"Now come on, pull yourself together," Benton said awkwardly, while the rest of us looked at each other and wandered around, and Duval stood in front of the glass in the door so nobody could see.

"All I can say is this," choked Jennings. "If there's anything I can do to make up for it, I will. I'd cut off my right arm—"

"Now, there's an idea!" I interjected facetiously, glad of any opportunity to break the tension. And suddenly ideas seemed to come to me. "Here's what I've done." I told them the steps I'd taken about the Ward, and went on, "Now look—McFane was in Detroit. Unquestionably that doesn't mean a damn thing, because the ship worked all right for me all the way across the country. Corey Transport has definitely been responsible for most or all of the things that have been running you people into the ground, and so making you no buy for the big company. We've got to get the goods on them. At present, we've got nothing tangible enough on McFane; and it may be that by using Jennings as a stool pigeon, we can."

"There's another thing," Bobby Agnew said. It was as though every one had taken a new lease on life. "Ordinarily, I might say that Tubby McFane, being a rough, tough customer and a stockholder in Corey, might have been running around doing things or trying to do things that old man Corey didn't know anything about and wouldn't approve of. But the more I think of the old reprobate's attitude this morning, the more I believe that he knows all about all this funny business. But it isn't natural for a company like that to use the sort of methods they're using unless they're desperate. I believe I can find out down town what their financial situation is. So, while you fellows are figuring things out, I'm going down town and throw myself on the mercy of a couple of people and see what I can discover."

"Better drop in and ask your wife's advice," I suggested.

He popped out the door.

"I BELIEVE there may be a lot in what he says," Duval said, walking up and down restlessly. "They may be more desperate to merge than we are, John; and what they've been

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doing is simply applying racketeering methods that have been used against all kinds of businesses in New York and Chicago."

"And look," I burst forth, because I couldn't keep still, "they think they've got you now, and maybe they have. If we should discover sabotage on the Ward, the pendulum might swing our way. But they can't know how completely we are at their mercy. What sort of an egg is this big company man who's snooping around, John?"

"Nice fellow," Benton admitted grudgingly.

"All right, I'll come back to him later," I said, the words fairly tumbling out of my mouth. "But the main thing is this. As I said, we can't be completely counted out, from Corey's point of view, until Corey actually closes the deal with International Airways. Suppose Jennings should go over and see McFane—McFane saw me take off to get him—and pretend to be terribly sore at us, saying we accused him of fixing the Ward and everything else. He could be in a regular fury. This is one time when the use of what's called an *agent provocateur* is justified. Let him deliberately offer to blow up our hangars, or something like that, and we'll see just how far these eggs are prepared to go—"

"Here comes a Corey Transport," Duval interrupted me as he gazed out the window.

I hadn't noticed the drone of the motors. When I'm talking I'm always greatly interested in what is being said.

In our wrought up condition, the arrival of the transport seemed extremely significant to us all; and when a minute later we saw Tubby McFane climb out of the ship and start for the office, it became even more so.

"Listen," I said to the rejuvenated Jennings. "You start acting your part right now, just to lay a foundation."

"You know, we're all forgetting," Benton said heavily, "that we really haven't got a thing except a vague conversation of months ago to go on, and some newspaper propaganda which probably isn't illegal. They couldn't have had anything to do with the Ward—"

"Oh, nertz!" I interrupted rudely. "You're fighting for your life, and if there's any way to get these babies, it's got to be used.—As it stands, now, you're licked cold. So do what I say, for heaven's sake!"

There was no argument against that.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TAKE-OFF.

WHEN Mr. Tubby McFane swaggered cockily into the office, he closed the door behind him and came to a halt. There was a grin of amazement on his lips and a hard, bright glint in his eyes as he listened to the conversation—which his entrance did not interrupt.

What he heard was me calling Jennings every name both sacred and profane that's ever been invented for uncomplimentary purposes. I was assisted heartily by Benton. And did Jennings snap back at us? That fox-faced little weakling should have been an actor.

"Now get the hell out of this office and off this field, or I'll tear you apart to see what makes you tick!" Benton roared in conclusion. "If there was one way we could prove it, I'd have you arrested now. But by heaven, I'll see to it that you never get another job in the airplane business in this country! You've ruined us, but you've

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ruined yourself, too; and I hope to God the day will come when I can get even with you!"

"Oh, yeah?" snarled Jennings, as he made for the door. "Think you're pretty wise, don't you? Well, you've got nothing on me; and I'll tell you this: I wish I had taken a chance and blown up your damned airport, instead of taking your lip for months and months, and taking the rap for your own dumbness. Have me arrested! What do I care? You've got nothing on me. Blacklist me if you want to.—And I'll pay you back for this, if it takes the rest of my life to do it!"

HE flung out of the office while McFane, his battered face beaming with devilish humor, whistled in pleased surprise.

"What's it all about?" he inquired finally.

"Oh, that louse jammed up his own DeHaviland this morning, and we think he dropped something in the gas of the Ward, just to get even for some run-ins he had with Agnew and Benton here," I told him. "There's no good in having the little punk arrested. We haven't got any real proof, and throwing him in jail wouldn't help us out any anyway."

"Right you are!" McFane said blithely. "In fact, it would hurt to have the public know that one of your own men was double-crossing you, even if it was true. This is going to make it tough for you to back up the stories the papers are carrying about your accusations of us, boys."

"Oh I don't know," Benton growled. "The amount of propaganda you birds have been putting out against us comes pretty close to the libel line, you know."

"But not close enough," McFane stated. He was very chipper indeed as he lit a cigarette and perched his barrel-like body on the edge of the desk. "As a matter of fact, you birds are licked seven ways from the jack. All those wild yowls you let out about us trying to ruin you this morning has got your neck in the noose, and it'll cost you plenty before you get through. Whatever the reason for all the things that have happened to-day, and before, you're sunk as far as the public's concerned. And I know that if you're not bankrupt now, it won't be long before you are!"

He squinted humorously at Duval. "I'm afraid your grandstand play came too late, Frank Merriwell," he grinned. "I like your nerve, though."

"Don't mention it!" Duval said airily. "By the way, to what do we owe the honor of your presence?"

"I got a proposition for you boys," McFane stated.

That bedraggled, hard-boiled chunk of a man was certainly one for the book. He was as blithe and airy as though he'd just dropped in for a social chat.

"Yes?—What kind of proposition?" grunted Benton. His heavy jaw was thrust forward and his turbulent eyes were narrowed.

"Of course," McFane said carelessly, "we've both been competing for the last couple of months for the chance to merge with International. I say we—I mean my boss, Corey, and you, Benton. You and your whole airport have got a lousy reputation, but you happen to have better mail contracts, and a little better location. I'll go a little further. I'll admit that International doesn't particularly like Corey's ships and would a little rather have your equipment than ours. But that doesn't alter the fact that right now

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we're a cinch to be bought by International, and you haven't got a chance and you know it! If they were going to buy you out, they'd wait until you were bankrupt and buy the whole outfit at a receiver's sale."

"How come you're so sure we're bankrupt?" inquired Duval.

HE was the one to ask that question, because McFane had had his eyes on the famous Duval most of the time when he was talking. It was as though Benton had automatically become a minor factor in the matter and Duval instead of the company he represented was the man whom McFane was trying to sell something. You would have to see the Duke to believe it, I guess. I think he must have felt that he swung a lot of weight, because I noticed he said "we" as though his connection with Pacific Pilots was very important, and I'll swear to that. His very presence gave Benton and me more courage—one instinctively felt that with Duke Duval around miracles could and would happen at the slightest provocation.

"Oh, Corey's got ways of getting information," McFane said blithely. "But I'll tell you. There's one way everything can be worked out pretty and to the advantage of one and all. That's for Corey to buy out you guys. That'll make everything sweet and pretty, and so I'm here to offer you seventy-five thousand dollars cash for Pacific Pilots, Inc., airport, mail contracts, equipment and ill will."

The way he grinned when he said that "ill will" was enough to make my fists clench, and then to make me relax and grin in spite of myself. He had the nerve of all the devils in hell.

"What are you doing—kidding?" exploded Benton. "Why that's not half the value of our ships alone, to say nothing of a better located airport, mail contracts—"

"Be that as it may," McFane said blithely, "that's the offer, and not a penny more. It's seventy-five thousand plunked in your laps—"

"Why that wouldn't come close to paying our debts," snapped Duval. "It's ridiculous.—However, we're not licked yet, Mr. McFane."

McFane shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, yes, you are, even if you could stagger along a little longer. You're going to have more suits against you than any rich corporation in the country could pay! And another thing—" He slid off the desk and planted himself on widespread trunk-like legs, as though steadying himself for an onslaught. The flesh seemed to gather a bit around his eyes and harden until it was stretched tightly over cheek bones and jaw. "I've got nothing to do with it," he said levelly. "I got a little stock—yes—but I'm just a 'peelot.' Let me tell you this: just a tip between flyers, for your own good. Old man Corey started in this game as a parachute jumper at fairs, a long while ago. He's an old bird with whiskers, but he's knocked around all his life, and he's lived as tough a life as any gangster or thug you ever saw. He was a hobo and an outdoor showman and everything else. When it comes right down to cases, that old foxy grandpa is likely to forget lawyers and the fact that he's a business man—and all the rest of it, understand?"

"Not exactly," Duval said alertly.

I felt something coming, and I was as tense as a cat at a rat hole.

"Now this is off the record, as I said," McFane reminded us, "and I may be all wrong. I don't really know any more than you do, but I am telling

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you that old man Corey is sore. He's so sore he can't do anything but walk up and down his office and curse, and there's more than one way to skin a cat. As one flyer to another, I'd strongly advise you to give in, because you can't tell what's going to happen if you don't."

"Okay, now I'll tell you something," roared Benton, getting to his feet so fast he tipped his chair over. He looked at Duval, as though for his approval. "You go back and tell your plug-ugly of a boss that we're not giving in and that we're fighting to the last ditch. Don't tell me what methods he's capable of. He's showed enough already and—"

"Now listen," snapped McFane, "don't go off at half cock. What I said may be all wrong. I was trying to be a friend, but as long as you think you're so smart, I won't argue with you any more."

He swaggered to the door and turned for one last farewell shot. "It takes smarter men than you guys, I guess, to know when you're licked. Hot air isn't going to help you now, nor Duke Duval either!" And off he went.

"LISTEN, boys," Duval said swiftly, as I shut the door. "There's more to this than meets the eye. If they were so sure of their position, they never would have offered seventy-five thousand bucks—or five thousand, for that matter. There's some reason we don't know about that makes them offer that dough, dousing all suits and trying to stop everything. It isn't natural for people who are sitting as pretty as they would seem to be to do that. Which means that for some reason they're not sitting so pretty as they look and claim to be."

"And furthermore," I pointed out, "Mr. McFane being very careful to protect himself, nevertheless was threatening us in no uncertain terms with a little low-and-lofty sabotage like setting fire to your hangars or something of that sort, John."

"Maybe Bobby will have some dope on that," Benton said. "But by gosh, I'll say this. If I end up without a job or a dollar, I'm going to get that Corey outfit, and get 'em good!"

"Great!" I crowed. "The old philanthropist is coming to himself!"

"And he's quit taking punches and has now begun to hand out a few," Duval said, repeating what he had told me that afternoon.

"I hope Jennings can act as well the rest of the day as he did just now," I said soulfully. "There, boys, may be our ace in the hole!"

Well, for the next two hours we sort of milled around and talked everything over by and large and up and down. The papers came out with headlines about Duval's drunken piloting, and likewise the broad accusations I had made so publicly against the Corey outfit. We had to stay marooned in the office to keep away from swarms of curious people who were around watching mechanics get the Ward right side up and cleaning away the wreckage of the collision between Jennings and myself.

IT was around three o'clock, and we were munching badly needed sandwiches when the phone rang for the fifty-ninth time. This time, however, it was not a reporter. It was the chief mechanic's voice.

"I've got the chemist's report, sir!" he told me, his voice shaking with excitement. "That gas is all clogged up. Looks like some one painted the inside of the tank with metallic paint. It did

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no harm at first, but after a while it began to dissolve, and it ruined the gas. It stood up while you were flying across the country. When we look at the inside of the tank I am sure we'll find out that I'm right!"

"Okay," I yelped, and hung up.

I told the others about it, and Duval interjected, "Let's drain the tank and make sure, and then call Detroit. I'll bet a thousand to one this is the first time it's ever happened on a Ward. They're certainly not painting the inside of their tanks unless they've tested out the paint first. It may be, lads, that you'll find a connection between Tubby McFane's being in Detroit and this new paint—"

"And it may be," bellowed Benton, "that the Ward Company will feel so responsible for the damage done us that we can make a deal!"

Just as this was permeating my consciousness, the phone rang again and I picked it up. It was Bobby Agnew on the wire, yowling for Benton. Benton listened and grunted, hawed and snorted monosyllabic interruptions to the steady flow of conversation from the other end. He hung up and faced us, his black eyes glowing and his fingers making his mane of coarse black hair look more like a tangled thicket than ever.

"Bobby's just succeeded in making a banker friend of his persuade a banker friend of his to tell business secrets!" he rumbled. "The Corey Company, according to all the dope, is going to be in a hell of a jam themselves two weeks from now, when notes come due. Six ships that they built were turned back by some company in Florida as not being up to specifications. They've been losing money hand over fist, and this banker has the impression that there's something phony about their stock selling. That is, they sold an issue of stock on financial statements that weren't exactly okay. That's just hearsay. The whole point is that unless this bank bird Corey does business with is all wrong, they haven't got any more money than we have—which is none at all!"

"Great!" yelped Duval. "That means they're in splendid condition to do something even more open against us than they've been doing in the past. As long as there's the slightest chance that International might lean toward our side, they won't be comfortable; and they won't waste any time wiping us out, either!"

"Come on, let's see about that tank," I suggested. "We can always talk."

WELL, it didn't take long to discover that the chief mechanic was absolutely right. A metallic paint had been applied to the interior of the big single gas tank that supplied all three motors, and was now almost completely eaten away. As a result the gas had become incombustible. The paint had stood up for many hours—long enough for me to get across the country—but finally the gas had worked on it, just in time for those motors to go bad at the worst possible time.

Benton turned to the Duke. His face worked a little bit.

"You know how glad I am, Duke," he said, as he thrust out his hand.

"You can't possibly know how glad I am," the Duke grinned, but I could fairly see the weight fall off his shoulders. I had almost forgotten that he was under twenty thousand dollars bail. What the penalty would have been for flying while drunk, and so endangering the lives of a dozen or more people, I don't know; but it wouldn't have been a ticket to the theater.

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I took a long breath. "We haven't got much to do from now on," I said, "so let's start. The first thing is a telephone call to Detroit. Great city, Detroit; but I doubt whether Tubby was there just to take in the sights."

That hunch grew stronger when word came from a highly excited gentleman in Detroit that McFane had been given practically the run of the airplane division, to study the construction of the ships on the excuse that Corey was thinking of placing an order for four of them for a new route to Seattle. Furthermore, there had been no change in their treatment of the inside of the tanks, and such a thing had never happened before. By unanimous consent, the Duke was elected to do the talking. For two reasons: his name meant as much to the whole flying business as that of any man in the game, and he possessed a tongue that tossed off words in a highly salubrious manner and possessed the nerve to use it. He sat there at the desk, radiating whole-souled enjoyment in the situation; and he had the officials in Detroit running around like waltzing mice, in less than two minutes. Before he'd got through, he had had words with old man Ward himself; and the fullest cooperation in investigating what had happened to the tank before the plane left Detroit. A definite adjustment of the financial damage done to Pacific Pilots was promised before he hung up. The Ward outfit would take full responsibility, if the facts were found to be as stated.

"We're on our way!" he yelped as he turned from the phone, "and we're going to get somewhere, John."

And happily enough, because it was the Duke who said it, even John believed it.

The aforementioned hunch became a practical certainty when Agnew arrived from town with the additional information that McFane was an extremely heavy stockholder in Corey, although just how he had got his hands on the money, or had otherwise been enabled to get control of so much stock, was shrouded in mystery.

I imagine it would have been quite a treat to have been a fly on the wall of that office, listening to the four of us discussing everything backwards and forwards, while we waited for something to happen. We tried to get in touch with Munson, the International man, but it was no good. If he proved to be a good egg, my scheme was to take him in on everything and get a little cooperation from him if possible; but he could not be found anywhere. We positively refused to make any statement to the press, and so the matter of the gas and Duval's innocence was unknown to the general public. Which was lucky for us.

IT was seven o'clock at night when it came my turn to answer the phone. On the other end was none other than Jennings.

"I don't know just what to make of it, lieutenant," he jabbered excitedly, "but I went over and asked for a job. I said I'd do anything to get even with you people. I talked to old man Corey —McFane wasn't there—and he made me a funny proposition."

"Well, what was it?" I barked at him. You could have cut the silence in that office with a knife.

"He offered me two hundred dollars to disappear completely from California, beat it away secretly without letting anybody know anything about it."

"When?" I snapped.

"To-night."

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"Did you take it?"

"Yes. I didn't know what else to do. He made it absolutely plain that I must not let anybody I knew see me or know anything about my disappearance. He said he'd give me an old Ford out there at the airport, and I could drive by out-of-the-way routes to Mexico. He used the excuse that if I was around, you people might try to prove that there was some connection between me and them—you know, charge that I was working for Corey when I did what I did this morning. I didn't dare come out to the field, for fear I might be seen and they'd get wise."

"All right, hold the phone." I snapped and relayed the news to the others.

"You know what I think?" Duval said eagerly. "They're going to pull something this very night, and if Jennings disappears, what happens will be laid to him. They'll say he wanted to get revenge on us. Then their man won't have a thing to worry about. If something happens to us, the police will go for Jennings the first thing. He's nowhere around—he's disappeared—open and shut case. Corey isn't concerned.—It's just the revenge of an old employee. Their line will be to pretend they know nothing about it."

In a minute we had come to a conclusion.

"Take the Ford, beat it away, and lay low in some town fifteen or twenty miles from here," I ordered Jennings over the phone. "Call us when you get set, so we'll know where you are.—You say you couldn't get any information about what they've got up their sleeve?"

"No, sir."

"All right, get under way; and don't forget to call the airport.—Don't go to a hotel. Go to some little rooming house or private home."

WHEN I hung up the phone, one of the finest talking quartets that ever got together started talking a mile a minute. When things finally got quieted down a little, Bobby Agnew, who had a brain like a steel trap, summed up the result of all our hysterical whoops.

"They've got their backs to the wall, and they're going to make a move tonight and try to blame it on Jennings, according to the way we figure," he said. "If we're right, the only move they could make would be to try to destroy our equipment in some way. If we're right about their reasons for wanting Jennings to disappear, there can't be many men concerned in it. But one of these broke gypsy flyers who hangs around Hollywood starving to death and smuggling aliens across the border would be their meat. He'd be the kind who's willing to break his neck in the pictures for twenty-five bucks. One flyer with a couple of bombs could fly over here, blow up the hangars, and beat it on into Mexico; and undoubtedly there are a hundred men around this town who'd do it for five hundred bucks. Then Corey would buy out what was left at a receiver's sale, and could hold up International for plenty. Everybody in the world would believe that Jennings was the flyer who did it."

There was silence for a second. I tried to find some flaw in the reasoning, but I couldn't. I don't suppose there's any other town in America where aërial pineappling, instead of the Chicago or ground brand, would be logical. But Agnew had not exaggerated about the number of funny eggs—airmen, cowboys, and what not—who were milling around Hollywood absolutely

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broke. I knew for a fact that the percentage of so-called picture flyers who picked up spare coin by flying an occasional Chink from Tia Juana and dropping him in some field around Los Angeles was as high as the percentage of fusel oil in bootleg liquor.

"Okay then," Agnew said. "I've got some weight around this town, and I might as well start to swing it."

I don't know why—probably it was because the continuous nervous strain of that day had got us all to a point where we believed in Santa Claus and thought in terms of Deadwood Dick—but we went about making our arrangements with sublime confidence that everything would happen as we were laying it out. Agnew went down town and personally saw the chief of police and the chief of detectives. Every flying field within twenty miles of Los Angeles was being watched within an hour. Dicks were lurking around both the Corey field and our own, and the word was broadcast to report instantly any ship in the air. Two cops who could handle machine guns with ease and efficiency were at our airport, with chutes strapped on them, ready to go. Duval and Benton, who had suddenly got to be such friends that alongside of 'em Damon and Pythias would have seemed like a civil war, had an amusing argument as to which one was to fly the cops if it became necessary. It was funny to listen to them, each being careful not to say anything that the other might take amiss. They were eager to agree on everything—an aye for an aye and a toot for a toot, as it were. It had been agreed that two of us were to stay at the airport as a kind of left line of defense against anything that might happen; and that in the air one ship, with two machine gunners aboard, would be sufficient to handle any reasonable opposition.

Benton won when he said doggedly, "I'm the one most responsible for the company being in the shape it's in, and I'm the only one who hasn't done anything to help pull it out!"

The two chiefs had been told everything although the cops were not certain what it was all about. If any ship tried to leave an airport they would see to it that it would never leave the ground. But we were taking no chances on its coming from some hideaway spot.

IT was midnight when that happened—and it did happen. The phone rang, and a ship was reported above Hermura. Instantly, Benton and the cops leaped into action and the motor of a Douglas roared into life. They had kept it warmed up, and the airport had been guarded against all visitors in order to prevent, if possible, our preparations from becoming known. That other ship, if it was on the way to do us damage, almost certainly would not be armed. Forcing it down—saving the pilot alive if possible—should be fairly simple.

As the Douglas roared upward in the rays of the big landing light, I rubbed my hands gleefully.

"Well, Duke," I said, "I've got a hunch that it's no wild goose chase. If I'm right, Sherlock Holmes has got nothing on us!"

Agnew had gone into town, digging away on more information about the Corey outfit, and trying to raise some money for his own company.

"I've got the same feeling," chirped Duval. "What I'm thinking is that, if we are right, how we're going to cash in on it!"

"For one thing," I said, "the reputa-

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tion of this place will be okay after everything comes out. It'll be bought out by International for sure, and financing through the temporary troubles should not be hard. Maybe old man Ward will help out. He ought to."

"Oh, sure," Duval agreed. "We'll be all right. But I've just been trying to figure exactly how we ought to work it."

"You're counting your chickens before you've got any eggs," I reminded him. "We're still taking a lot for granted."

We fell silent, both of us walking around restlessly. The Duke would have given plenty to be in action. The drone of the Douglas's motor had receded until it was barely audible.

Then suddenly I cocked an ear and inclined it northward. A new sound had reached me. There was another ship in the air, and no ship could have got that close from Hermura so fast. The next second, vaguely visible in a sky made bright by the lights of Los Angeles, there bulked a Corey transport.

"It's ten to one that the second our ship took the air, the Corey outfit figured the jig was up and that we were wise," the transfigured Duval yelled. "I'll bet anything that's Corey and McFane, and maybe one or two others, beating it while the beating's good!"

"You're right!" I yelped.

As we ran toward the line, for no particular reason, my brain was working faster than my legs—and they were working fast enough. Striving to put myself in the place of Corey and McFane, I realized that I would probably have figured that only some unusual circumstance could be the reason for one of our ships taking off from our airport at midnight. And under the circumstances, if I had had a ship on the way to bomb the port, I knew that I most certainly would have figured that the chances were strong that my scheme had been discovered, and would have taken off for Mexico.—If I was wrong, no harm would be done. If I was right, I would have saved myself from arrest.

The Duke was yelling orders all the while, but I didn't know what he was saying. One thing I did know, however. We were going to get up in the air and find out whether we were right or not.

Assistants came running with parachutes as the motor of the waiting Douglas caught and mechanics warmed it up with dangerous speed.

"That transport means that we're right all along the line," yelled the Duke as I buckled on the 'chute.

As I think back on it, I don't remember calling for the 'chutes at all; and neither does the Duke, but they say one of us did. But I'll swear that I, personally, had absolutely no plan except to get close to the transport and make sure who was in it. Duval says he didn't have any more of a plan than I did.

A moment later we were taking off.

CHAPTER V.

BREAKS.

THE transport's course was about three miles west of the airdrome. It wasn't making over a hundred miles an hour—a Corey couldn't make more than a hundred and ten, and the Douglas could make a hundred and forty, wide open. We overhauled that big ship so fast that it seemed to be hanging stationary in the sky, and

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when we got close to it I saw seated side by side, Tubby McFane at the controls and old man Corey peeking out from behind his whiskers. Duval, who was doing the flying in the front cockpit, turned. He grinned beatifically.

Tubby McFane waved at us. I guess the mold was broken after he was manufactured. I don't know that I've ever met any one who gradually impressed me as being such a thoroughly bad boy. Neither scruples nor the fear of God was in him.

I don't know whether it was that insolent wave of McFane's that caused the Duke to make up his mind, or whether, as is more likely, that smiling hellion before me would have done what he did anyway. I do know that two things caused me to yell my consent to the scheme that the Duke, cuting the motor so that he could make himself heard, yelled into my gently waving ear. I think if it had been any other flyer in the world except Duval who was going to do the flying, I'd have said no. I like to be at the stick when my neck's in danger. I might not have said yes even to the Duke if it hadn't been that I had a score to settle with Tubby McFane. Not only is Lieutenant Slimuel X. Evans far from famous for his good sense, but as the Duke shoved the throttle ahead again, your Uncle Slimuel was feeling crazy enough to participate in anything.

Four thousand feet high, with the great sea of light that was Los Angeles to our right, and the Rockies to our left, the two men we were most anxious to get were within a hundred feet of us, flying toward Mexico and safety. They had on parachutes, too, evidently planning on a long and dangerous flight over the jungles of Mexico.

The Duke opened the Liberty motor wide. It shot upward like a grasshopper trying to make a record. A hundred feet above the huge transport, he throttled until the two planes were flying at the same speed.

The Corey's broad, stubby fuselage and huge wings spread out below us invitingly. I took a glance at the ground below. There were open fields, all of them small. Then, bit by bit, Duval throttled the motor as we began a dive. I must have had my second wind, after that long and exhausting day.

I didn't seem to have a nerve in my body, and the thought of failure was not in my mind at all. I can't imagine to this day why I wasn't scared to death. I guess I'd had so many shocks that I was numb. As for the Duke—he was flying through what was for him the Seventh Heaven.

Anyway, we came down toward the transport in a shallow dive. They couldn't possibly see us from their enclosed cockpit. I have never seen better flying in my life. Pardon me for whooping in a wild-eyed manner, but after that first and last flight of mine with the Duke, I would be willing to bet that he could land the DO-X on a dime. I also wouldn't care to fly with him in it, for fear he would insist on doing the same, if it came into his mind.

Finally we were hovering ten feet above the transport. Duval cut the motor entirely, and the big ship slid away in front of us. Then he nosed down further, and gave it one last burst. He jerked back on the stick. We were going at almost exactly the same speed as the Corey. The Douglas hovered; and just as the big ship was starting to ease ahead, we clumped down on its back on wheels and tail skid, in a perfect three pointer! I felt our wheels crunch through the linen

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and wood of the front part of the big ship.

AT that second, my belt unfastened and my right hand on the rip cord ring at my side, I left that vicinity with the uncontrollable gasp of fear which I always give vent to when I jump into space wearing on my back a pack which is supposed to open. It always has worked—and yet some time it might not!

For some reason or other, I didn't turn over and over as I usually do and I had a dimmed, blurred impression of what happened. I saw Duval jump just as the transport staggered drunkenly, and it must have been that the startled McFane pulled back on the wheel. Anyway, the Douglas sort of slid back down the fuselage, toward the tail of the big ship. As I pulled the rip cord ring of my 'chute and bent double with the shock as the big umbrella bellied open, the roar of the transport's motors ceased abruptly. The tearing crash as our ship tumbled off the tail came like a thunderclap.

Swinging in terrifying arcs below my 'chute, which was a hundred feet below Duval's, I saw Corey and McFane bail out of their crippled ship as its nose settled for the last dive to earth.

"Smoked 'em out!" Duval yelled, a wild laugh in his voice. "I'll be with you in a second!"

For a minute I couldn't imagine what he meant. Then I saw him hauling on his shroud lines until he had one side of his 'chute down and was dropping almost twice as fast as I was. When he got about even with me, and not more than a hundred feet to one side of me, he released it. We dropped side by side, five hundred feet below McFane and Corey!

"I don't like to shout!" he called to me. "Boy, wasn't that a darb? I knew there was some reason why I left that oil company flat!"

"Now that we've got those bozos, what are we going to do with them?" I inquired. "Suppose they've got guns?"

"Probably they have," the Duke answered complacently. "We'll have time to get to the place where they'll land, and we'll be waiting for them there."

They were several hundred feet to one side of us, and fully five hundred feet higher, as I said. Just at that moment the Douglas hit the ground and blew up with the loudest report I had ever heard—until fifteen seconds later, when the transport plowed into the ground. The explosion of the big ship I'm sure must have knocked the earth slightly off its course. The gas tank blew up, and for a few seconds the countryside was so light that I wouldn't have been surprised if a few hens got confused and laid their morning eggs. Then the two wrecks subsided into a bonfire, which assisted me no little in deciding which way to slip my 'chute for a landing.

We couldn't tell whether the two above us were armed or not, because Tubby had on overalls and the old man a fur-lined flying suit.

"HELL, they can't escape!" I yelled to Duval. "They've got not a Chinaman's chance of getting away now!"

And they hadn't. Only an occasional house dotted the landscape in our vicinity, and one of us could get to a phone with reasonable speed and have an airplane or so out keeping tabs on them before they could even get to an automobile. So I personally decided

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to be thankful if I landed safely, and I concluded I'd take no chances prowling through the darkness after those two cookies. Mr. Tubby McFane was a very sour pickle under any conditions; and under those immediately obtaining, he doubtless would prefer to be caught dead rather than alive.

However, we got a break. We both landed in an open field, and a minute or so later, we watched McFane end up with his 'chute caught in the branches, himself h a n g i n g limply, with his feet only a few inches from the ground.

"I'll get him!—You take the old man!" yelled Duval. He was closest to Tubby.

The old man landed in the open, while I made for him like a kangaroo in a hurry. He was dragged until his 'chute caught on a fence, and even then he didn't get up. He tried to, but he couldn't. When I got to him I found that he had a broken leg.

"Well, Mr. Corey," I said as I unsnapped his 'chute, "I guess this big business battle is about over, don't you think?"

He just glared at me out of his little red-rimmed eyes. A tough old customer he was behind his Santa Claus foliage!

The Duke was staggering toward us, carrying the unconscious McFane. By the time a car with an excited man and woman in it had steamed up the road only a hundred yards or so away, and as we were getting the cripples to a farmer's house, I could see that two ships were landing on the Pacific Pilots' airdrome, where only one had taken off.

"See that?" inquired Duval, waving toward the airdrome. He was radiant. It was moments such as had just passed which made life worth while, as far as he was concerned.

"I hope so," I stated in a heartfelt manner. The reaction was setting in on me hard. "In the days when I was young and salty," I went on, "a little excitement went very nicely. But right now a rocking chair is my idea of a thrill!"

"I'll bet we can all have one on top of the world now," stated the Duke as he climbed into the car. "I've got a leaping, crawling hunch that the round-up's complete!"

AND so it proved to be. An hour later, our prisoners on their way to town in a police ambulance, we arrived at the airdrome to discover that there were two powerful, home-made bombs on the Corey ship which John had rounded up while we were gone. The "peelot" thereof spouted what he knew. He had dealt exclusively with Tubby McFane.

McFane and Corey refused to say a cockeyed word, but they didn't need to; and if you don't think that the newspapers had a holiday, you're crazy.

Benton and Duval were suddenly the biggest men in town, though of course the Duke was the bigger of the two.

Bobby Agnew likewise became a big shot. When I left, two days later, the deal with International was all set, including the services of Benton as general manager for the western division for International Airways. Duval was chief pilot.

Me? Oh, I'm living the quiet and genteel life of a Border Patrolman at McMullen, Texas. I gallop a DeHaviland up and down the Rio Grande, and the boys out in Los Angeles who are fighting for gold and glory—and picture actresses—have my blessing.

THE END.

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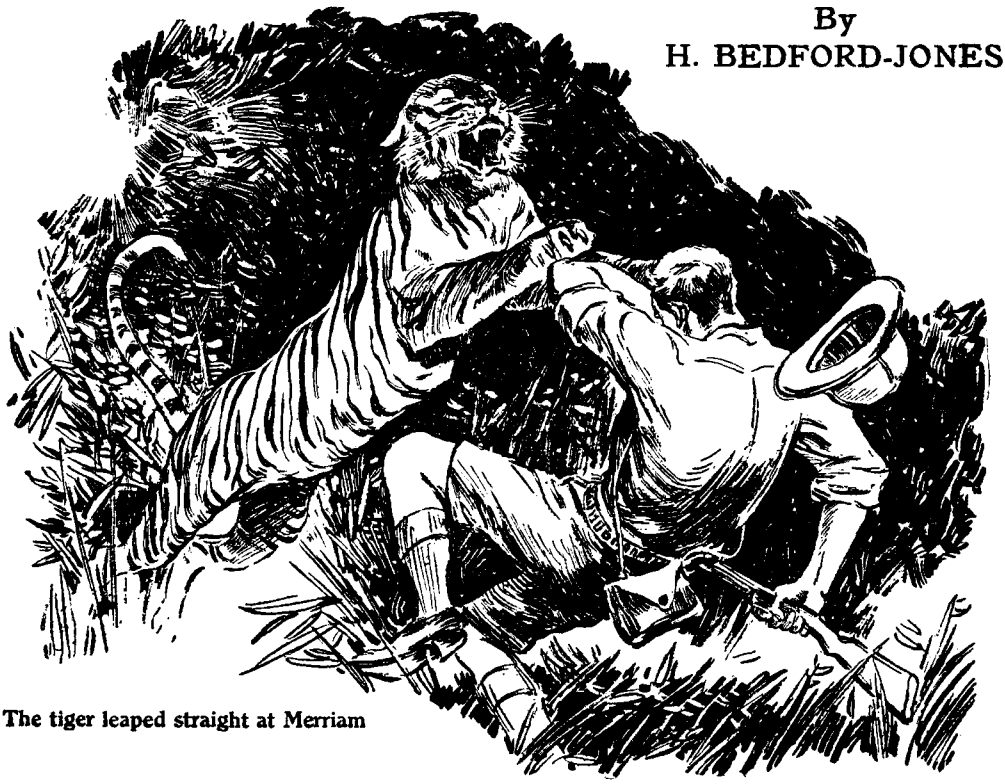
Finders Keepers

By
H. BEDFORD-JONES



The tiger leaped straight at Merriam

Merriam, in the South China hills, thought he had shaken off his past—but some pasts are hard to bury

ALONE white man in the South China hills, three days' travel from Yunnan, does not have a soft time of it, but Merriam got on. He was a strapping fellow with crisp yellow hair, a direct gaze, pleasant but stubborn features; one inferred he would hew to the line regardless of consequences.

He visited Yunnan City once a month, but his whole preoccupation was with the Nam Chong tin mine. None of its managers had stuck long; it had a bad name, but Merriam was delighted with it. He liked the old temple, converted into a house for the manager, on the hill-flank above the mine and its village of workmen. He liked these friendly Southern Chinese, and he liked the village ne'er-do-well, Ngan. Also, Ngan liked him.

Ngan was a hunter, pure and simple, hunting for the pot, for furs, for pleasure. Merriam kept him in cartridges for his old Lebel rifle, frequently went hunting with him. Ragged Ngan, shrewd, wrinkled, knew many strange and intangible things, and had sensed the abiding hurt in Merriam's heart.

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The mine was not out of the world. Wuting, a city of the *chow* class, was a short day's journey away. Native and Arab peddlers, Miao folk from the hills, drifters from the Tibet and Burma caravan routes, came and went. A Hindu had opened a bazaar in the village. News thrived, all sorts of news, appearing mysteriously and relayed to Merriam by his house boys.

On his sixth monthly visit to Yunnan City he lunched as usual at the club with old Doctor Aintree, who was a sort of father confessor to the whole foreign colony.

"How long will you be sticking with yon mine, Merriam?"

"Who knows?" Merriam shrugged. "Years, perhaps. I like it."

"I have ma doubts, aye," said Aintree. "Still, I'm no saying ye'll not stay. A man like you will be having a lass back in the States, eh?"

"No." Merriam's eyes struck at him directly. "No. That's done with. I was married once."

"A century ago?" Aintree's wrinkled features expressed sage comprehension.

"A thousand years ago." Merriam bit at his cheroot, mouthed it reflectively. "The loveliest girl in the world. Met her in San Francisco, married her there. Later, we went back to her family in the East. Damn families! She was a different person then, doctor."

"That 'll be the psychological effect—but never mind. Go on," said Aintree. "Society?"

"Yes. All for pink teas and that sort of thing. Plenty of money. She got out of the notion of accompanying me about the world." Merriam's brows drew into a straight line. "And besides, there was another chap she might have married. I was always hearing about Palmer Clarke—paragon of excellence and all that. Wonderful family. Settled chap, very popular."

"Aye?" said the doctor. "And did ye become friends with him?"

"Never met him," said Merriam. "I cleared out. Put the divorce through quietly and silently and skipped for China and here. I presume she married Palmer Clarke next day."

"Who, the loveliest girl in the world?" said Aintree dryly.

Merriam flushed. "Hell! Yes, she is, none the less. I couldn't help it if she was really in love with him."

"No, and you're a stubborn man," said Aintree. Then, seeing that his probe had gone over-deep, he changed the subject. "Well, and have ye landed another stripes up your way?"

"Going out after one on my return," and Merriam nodded. "A big man-eater."

That afternoon, as he checked over his supply lists in his room at the Hotel Terminus, a knock came at Merriam's door. He opened, to admit a man he had met on the previous day—Prentiss, one of the two white men in charge of the important customs station down at Sumao, on the Burmese border.

"Hope I don't intrude, Merriam," exclaimed Prentiss, shaking hands, "but Aintree tells me you're out after tiger."

"Yes." Merriam set out cheroots. "We've located a man-eater, a big fellow."

"Well, I've a fortnight's leave." Prentiss was a rangy, iron-jawed man, rather young to have so hard and direct a gaze, such ruthless purpose about his mouth. "I'm fed up with the city; would there be any chance of going with you? Where there's one tiger, there should be two, at this season. If I'd be in the way, don't hesitate—"

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"Delighted!" exclaimed Merriam, really glad to have company. "No trouble. I can put you up easily. But I'm getting off first thing in the morning for the mine."

"Right! It's frightfully good of you, old chap," said Prentiss with enthusiasm, and plunged into details. The two men became better acquainted; Prentiss was from Boston, he said, but Merriam knew no one there, and they found no common ground of friendship. Twenty minutes later Prentiss departed, arranging to show up early for breakfast.

THE horses left behind at Wuting, the two men took mules for the last stage of the journey, and late that third afternoon gained the roadfork. One trail led on to the Nan Chong mine and village, the other turned out to the manager's house. Merriam took the latter road, then drew rein as a figure appeared ahead. It was that of the hunter.

"Our guide, Prentiss. Probably has all sorts of gossip."

He introduced Ngan. The latter stood on one foot, scratched his matted hair, and a grin split his brown, seamed countenance.

"Heavenborn, there is another man at your house."

"What?" exclaimed Merriam. "A white man?"

"No. A Tibetan, perhaps. I think he is dying. I found him in the jungle."

"You son of devils! How dare you take him to my house?"

Ngan grinned. "None other was worthy of him, for his forehead bears the trigram of Heaven. Evidently he was some great man. You should whip your house boys, for they objected when I laid him in the stables, and I nearly had to shoot the number one boy."

Impatiently, Merriam gestured, and the hunter turned, loping along the trail ahead of them. Prentiss, who had a fair knowledge of Chinese, chuckled softly.

"He means the trigram used in divination?"

"What the devil he means, I don't know. The Chien or Heaven trigram is three unbroken lines, one above the other. Well, we'll soon see what he means."

Presently they rode into the courtyard before the house. A clear, cool spring gushed out at one side. Great trees, evergreens, fragrant nanmu, cryptomerias, towered over the roof; from the inclosure one could see for miles across the valleys. The house itself, made from the central hall of the old temple, was modernized and very comfortable. Erh and the other two house boys came running, and took away the mules. Ngan squatted outside and gazed reflectively at the distant hills.

"We'll sling an extra cot in my room," said Merriam, showing his guest about. "The stables and kitchen are behind— Hello! Better look up that chap. Want to come?"

"Rather!"

They rejoined Ngan, and passed around to the rear shed serving as stable. Here, lying on a heap of grass and rags, was a nearly naked figure. Close by was a large bundle wrapped in oilskin, and a plate of untouched food. They regarded the man curiously.

BROWN-SKINNED, of vigorous build, he was emaciated, and lay barely breathing. One shoulder was bandaged, under his ribs was an unhealed wound. Fever burned him.

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"When did you find him?" asked Merriam.

"I brought him here last night, heavenborn. He has not moved or spoken. Look at the symbol of Heaven on his forehead."

It was true. Three deep wrinkles crossed the forehead in three unbroken lines, one above the other, forming the Heaven trigram.

Prentiss pointed to the scarified legs. "Leeches. He's come through the jungles down toward the border."

Merriam felt the faint pulse, lifted the bandage about the shoulder, dropped it with a whistle. "Bullets. What's your guess, Prentiss?"

"Annamese or Burmese. Wound festered?"

"Rotten. He's dying." Merriam picked up the bundle. "Is this his, Ngan?"

"Yes, heavenborn. Did I do well to bring him here?"

"You did. When he dies, remove the body. To-morrow we leave for the Heaven Ascending Valley, after the tiger. Have mules ready, with two extra animals for our cots and supplies."

"With the sun, heavenborn." Ngan looked at his find. "He is some great person, for he is marked by Heaven. It is well that he dies in a fitting place."

"Going to do anything for him?" asked Prentiss. "Medicines, bandages—"

Merriam shrugged. "No use. He's as good as dead now; best leave him in peace."

They returned to the house. Half an hour later, bathed and changed, Merriam sank into a Singapore chair in the big living room and sipped the drink Erh brought him.

"Penny for your thoughts!" he said, smiling at Prentiss.

"You," said Prentiss awkwardly. "You seemed so cursed callous about that chap."

"Why not? Listen!" From somewhere outside came the brazen yammering of a gong. "That's Ngan, chasing off devils. The chap is dead. Here's peace to him! By the way, you handle the language wonderfully well, Prentiss. Thought you'd only been out a few months."

"Yes, but I was born in China," said Prentiss. "My father was a missionary up in Hunan province. I lived here until I was about twelve."

"That's odd!" exclaimed Merriam, staring at him. "Allee Samee Palmer Clarke! Only his dad was a judge in the International Court up in Shanghai. No end of influence and money."

Prentiss started slightly. "Clarke! Who's he?"

"The chap my wife is married to at present—presumably happily. Hello!" Merriam's eye caught sight of the bundle he had fetched in. "Let's open that chap's haversack. Pass me the knife from the table, will you?"

With the Siamese knife Prentiss handed him, he ripped the cords of the bundle and laid back the folds of oiled silk. He brought to light a rolled-up khaki military tunic, without insignia. Inside this was a Browning pistol, fully loaded, a dozen thin silver coins in a knotted bit of silk, and a hard bundle of pebbles tied up in cotton cloth. With the knife he ripped this cloth apart and the pebbles flowed on the table, dull red spots, gleaming softly. Merriam broke into a laugh.

"He must have collected pretty stones—good Lord!"

He picked up some of the pebbles. Leaping from his chair, he hurried into the little room he had fixed over as a laboratory. Prentiss examined the silver coins, then called out:

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"Merriam! These are Burmese coins—the one that chap Scindia was circulating when his rebellion was going strong. Remember the stories about him? They say he got away from the British and slipped over the border. There's a big reward for him, dead or alive. Upon my word, I believe this man was Scindia in person!"

"I know he was," floated back Merriam's voice. Presently he appeared. "Look at those stones on the table, man! Bits of alumina, corundum from Burma! Remember the story about how Scindia looted the ruby mines? Well, here's the loot!"

DURING the argument, Prentiss once or twice showed a nasty streak, but Merriam appeared not to notice it.

The man found dying in the jungle must have been Scindia, organizer of the revolt which for months past had paralyzed the British power in Burma. Scindia had waged battles, had evaded columns, had dreamed a dream of empire—only to die alone and unknown over the border.

"A fortune? Very likely," said Merriam, amiable but with dogged insistence. "And we know where the stones come from, so back they go."

"But use your reason, man!" broke in Prentiss. "Who are the owners? The blasted syndicate that has leased the ruby mines the past forty years. They can't prove ownership. We don't know these rubies were looted from them, even if we do know the chap was Scindia."

"And that's enough," said Merriam dryly. He was tired of the argument.

"But the stones belong to us! Finders keepers, you know—"

"Don't be an ass. They belong to Ngan, let's say! No, when we've potted the tiger, we'll go back to Yunnan and turn over the rubies, old chap. That's final."

He wrapped up the coins and stones, laying the Browning on the table. For an instant the dark eyes of Prentiss flashed, then he shrugged and yielded.

"Well, it's your party. You may change your mind later."

"I shan't, though. Shall we turn in? We've a hard trip to-morrow—must reach that village by evening. And we don't use *machans,* I warn you!"

"Suits me," said Prentiss. "No sport in potting a cat from a tree platform, anyhow. If you don't mind, I think I'll stay up and read a bit."

So Merriam turned in. Prentiss lit a fresh cheroot, picked up an old magazine and settled down in his chair; but not to read. That bundle on the table drew his thoughts; those pebbles of fire set hot sparks drifting in his blood. He was viciously tempted to act here and now, but he knew the rank folly of asserting himself.

Merriam was the type to fight even to incredible lengths, for nothing more than sheer stubbornness. And there was too much at stake to take chances, reflected Prentiss. With a price on his head, Scindia had probably been heading for some definite place; he carried wounds and gangrene and death with him, but he had not abandoned those stones. A man would be a fool to abandon them!

On the desk in one corner was the picture of a woman, in a small silver frame. Later, his cheroot finished, Prentiss went over to it, picked it up, looked at it a long while; his hard features were set in bitter lines as he gazed, but the bitterness faded slowly away, to be replaced by a strange look of dumb and hopeless misery. He lifted the photograph to his lips—then, swift-

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ly, set it down again and glanced around the empty room.

"Fool!" he muttered, and went to his cot in the adjacent chamber.

They were up early and off, with Ngan and the pack mules. They rode by rocky trails where swinging bamboo bridges crossed wild gorges, and precipitous hill flanks were ever before and behind. Around them was the glorious winter that blesses alike the uplands of Yunnan, California, and Morocco—keenly invigorating air, a flood of warm sunlight, blue distant peaks drawing men ever on toward infinity.

These irregular trails wound and twisted to throw off the devils always dogging Chinese heels, for devils can travel only in a straight line. Yet devils, of a kind, lingered. Prentiss rode behind Merriam. His hard-set features hinted at tormenting thoughts adrift inwardly and his dark eyes lighted as though with gusty flames. Toward mid-afternoon, however, when they halted beside a mountain stream to brew tea, he flung off his moody air, laughing and joking freely. But when he looked at Merriam, his eyes were like black Han jade.

Evening had come when they reached the village with its inevitable temple, where the monk in charge made room for their cots alongside his images of the gods. The village folk crowded around ten deep and Ngan went into conference with them. They announced that only this morning the tiger had killed a woman. They were sure, too, the beast had a mate.

THEIR meal over, Prentiss went for a stroll in the moonlight while Merriam made arrangements for the hunt. In half an hour he returned to find Ngan gone—as he later remembered — and everything settled.

"Couldn't be better," said Merriam, pulling off his boots. "They know where the lair is. We'll have a line of beaters sending the cats straight down a gully to the guns."

"Then you take the first," and Prentiss yawned. "You get the honors."

Merriam shrugged, and stretched out with a sigh of relaxation.

Dawn found them up and breakfasting. The beaters were already gone. Ngan was to accompany them to the chosen spot, two miles from the village, and was carefully furbishing up his old Lebel. Merriam carried a Winchester, but was frank in his admiration of the rather old-fashioned weapon of Prentiss—a heavy double-barrelled rifle, hand-made in London. Prentiss had taken it over from an Englishman down-country who needed money badly. It was a beautiful weapon, rare in these days of machine-made guns.

They were off with sunrise, accompanied by two native guides. It was well over an hour when they reached their position, a narrow, brush-thick ravine. Already they could hear the distant pandemonium of yells, gongs and devil-chasers marking the approach of the beaters. A native dashed in with word that two tigers had been sighted and were being well driven.

Prentiss produced cartridges and loaded his double-barrel, then extended it to Merriam.

"Why not use this? Especially as you fancy it a bit. The thing's heavy for me," he explained, "and I'd really prefer yours. You'll have an extra bullet ready in case the first doesn't stop him."

Merriam was delighted. The hunter Ngan watched the two as though puzzled, but made no comment. Mer-

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riam took post to the left of the ravine, Prentiss to the right; the latter was obviously nervous, and admitted it with a laugh. In the center, behind them, remained Ngan the hunter. The guides had vanished hurriedly. The three were alone.

Closer drew the din of the beaters, then gradually died away; both men knew what this meant. The driven animals were in the trap, coming straight along the ravine. Prentiss was very white, and sweat rolled down his cheeks; the tense, silent waiting was getting on his nerves, and Merriam eyed him in some amazement. Prentiss was the last man in the world, apparently, to get buck fever. Then Merriam centered his attention on the brush.

The brush suddenly waved and crackled, grew still again. Merriam threw up his weapon, waited tensely. Prentiss opened his lips as though to cry out, then checked himself, remained silent, staring, his face ghastly, his dark eyes all ablaze. Another stir of the brush, another silence—then Merriam's voice, low and eager, restrained.

"Both coming together. Fire at will if you see one—"

Ngan let fly a stone that crackled in the brush. Low-bellied, ears flat, a great tawny shape came slinking forward, motion almost imperceptible, eyes flaming upon Merriam. The latter aimed carefully, noted the crouching pause for the spring, fired.

To the explosion, the tiger rose in air with a tremendous catapult leap, straight at Merriam, apparently unhurt. Merriam gave him the other barrel in midair, and might as well have been firing a popgun. A yell of dismay burst from Ngan; it was drowned in a furious flurry of bodies, moving too swiftly for the eye to follow.

Merriam, trying to evade the leap, was knocked ten feet away into the brush and lay quiet. A second tawny shape appeared. It had all happened in the fraction of an instant.

Prentiss wakened suddenly, put his ball into the first tiger and fetched the beast around with a wrenching roar of pain. The second cat leaped. Prentiss met the leap with beautiful precision, sending a bullet through eye to brain. Like an echo whipped out the crack of Ngan's old Lebel, and the wounded beast sank down. It was over; both tigers dead.

But Prentiss stood, rifle in hand, staring at the spot where Merriam lay. Ngan was running to it, leaping through the brush. As though agonized, Prentiss awaited his word, sweat running down his white features. Ngan rose and came slowly toward him.

"Dead, master. His neck is broken."

A low, inarticulate cry escaped the lips of Prentiss. He seemed on the verge of collapse; the rifle slipped from his fingers. Here and there appeared villagers, peering among the trees.

"Have him—have him brought—" The words died on his lips. A shiver seized upon him. He turned abruptly to the trail by which they had come from the village.

"Have him brought along," he ordered curtly, regaining his voice. Ngan nodded assent.

Prentiss, ignoring the fallen rifle, the dead beasts, the villagers, ignoring even the body of Merriam in the brush, went staggering away at a half run, wiping sweat from his face.

WHEN he reached the temple, Prentiss broke out a bottle of cognac and swallowed drink after drink, rapidly. The liquor, which should have stupefied him, had no ef-

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fect except to whip him into normality by the time Ngan appeared, carrying all three rifles.

"I brought your weapon, Heavenborn," said he. "They are making a litter to carry him here. Shall we bury him here?"

"No." The eyes of Prentiss darted about the temple room. "Bring him back to the mine. I will go on, with one mule and a guide."

"And the tiger skins?" Ngan scratched his left knee with his right foot and watched Prentiss curiously. "It will take time—"

"Do what you like with them. Do anything!" broke out Prentiss abruptly. "I'm going on to the mine. Get me a guide from the village."

"Neither of his shots hit that tiger, master," said the hunter. "It is remarkable. The Heavenborn was a good shot. I never knew him to miss—"

Prentiss looked at him with smoldering, bloodshot eyes. "Get off, find me a guide!" he cried angrily. "I'm leaving at once. A mule and a guide."

Ngan departed obediently. Prentiss caught up his fine hand-made rifle and hurled it after the hunter with a curse. Then he fell to work, packing a few things, rolling up blankets.

Ten minutes later he was riding away with a guide. He had finished the cognac; none the less he had gone to pieces, and only the thought of the fiery pebbles steadied him as he rode.

It was late the following afternoon when Prentiss came to Nam Chong, for his guide had twice lost the way. When he came into the courtyard, the house boys came to take the mule. He dismounted, his face hard and almost savagely set in grim lines.

"Your master comes later," was all he said to them, and then passed into the house.

He hunted up Merriam's small stock of liquor and took a drink. It put an edge on him. He was himself again by this time, but harder in the face, a stonier look in his dark eyes. He bathed and changed. He looked once at the silver-framed photograph, then turned it face down.

Darkness was falling. The house boys had the lamps going, and Erh, the number one boy, asked whether Merriam would be back for dinner. Prentiss merely shook his head and went on opening the bundle containing the reddish pebbles with hearts of fire.

Laying the pistol to one side, on the table, and disdaining the silver coins, he spread out the stones and regarded them with hard, emotionless eyes as they glittered dully in the light. Some were of large size, others had been partially polished, although uncut. Presently Erh timidly announced dinner, so Prentiss covered them up with the cloth and went to the dining room, where he had last eaten across the table from his host.

He sat through the meal in stony silence. His dark gaze drove at the boys, at the windows, at the food. He must remain, of course, and bury Merriam. He must report the matter at Yunnan City, neglecting nothing. No authorities would be interested, but it must be reported to the American consul for his own self protection. The decent thing to do. At the thought, his eyes glittered with savage irony.

KNOWING how slowly he himself had returned here, he was not surprised, upon going back to the big main room, to find the tattered, unkempt figure of Ngan squatting inside the door.

"Got back, did you? And you brought him?" inquired Prentiss.

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"He is here." The hunter jerked his thumb toward the courtyard. His beady eyes were fastened upon Prentiss in a steady stare. "I brought your rifle, the one you threw away."

"Keep it. I give it to you."

"Good," said Ngan. "The empty shells are still in it. The ones your knife scratched."

Prentiss, in the act of filling his pipe, became as though paralyzed.

"What's that?" he said. "My knife?"

"Certainly," assented Ngan. "Night before last. In the moonlight. I saw you working on those cartridges, cutting out the bullets."

A deathly silence settled on the room. Ngan remained quite impassive. The hard features of Prentiss slowly paled.

"What lies are these, Ngan?" he asked in a hoarse, thick voice.

"Truth, master," said the hunter indifferently, as though it mattered not. "I saw at once why the gun did not hurt the tiger. The bullets were cut out. I found them. I have them."

Prentiss tucked tobacco into his pipe, caught his breath sharply, hesitated. He would have known how to deal with one of his own race, but Ngan puzzled him. He was not sure whether Ngan was accusing him, or merely regarded the action as one of the odd ways of foreign devils.

Then he got the pipe between his teeth, held a match to it with steady fingers. There was but one thing for it; the two of them were alone here, on the table was the Browning. Prentiss twirled out the match, took a step to the table, dropped the match—then his hand swooped on the pistol and jerked it up. The sharp explosion reverberated through the room.

Prentiss blinked. Ngan had not stirred, had uttered no sound. Frantically, Prentiss threw up the pistol again, but a quick, crackling laugh from the hunter checked him.

"It is lucky for you I am not a tiger," said Ngan. "I cut out the bullets while you were at dinner. But I did tell you a lie when I said my master's neck was broken. He is unhurt."

Prentiss stepped back a pace, let the pistol fall from his hand. Something white bulked in the doorway. A low and terrible cry burst from him as he recognized Merriam. What Ngan had just said impacted upon his brain. Merriam was alive, knew everything.

Amid a dreaded stillness, louder than any thunder, Merriam came into the room and nodded calmly to Prentiss. He made no reference to the futile shot, nor to what was past; he glanced at the red stones on the table, picked up a cigarette, and turned to Ngan.

"Be ready to go to the city with us at sunrise. Until then, have two men watch the trails, that this guest of mine may not depart without our knowledge."

Ngan rose and was gone. Erh came into the room and stopped short, staring.

"Hello, Erh," said Merriam casually, lighting his cigarette. "Bring me something to eat, in here. And a cup of tea."

He turned to Prentiss, regarding him calmly. A bandage was about his chest, beneath his shirt, bulking large. A mortal pallor had stolen into the face of Prentiss, but his shoulders squared a little. He gasped out broken words.

"Well—you know it all. What—what's the program? No use beating about the bush."

"None whatever," said Merriam. "We'll go back to Yunnan City together. I'll turn over these effects of

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Scindia's to the British consul and tell him everything. Everything."

Prentiss started. "No!" he exclaimed sharply. "I won't do that—I won't! Kill me, if you like; I don't give a damn. But not that."

"Kill you? I'm not your kind," said Merriam, his face stony. "So far as I'm concerned, I don't care about what's happened; it's not revenge that I'm after. But you're a living menace to decent men. It's my duty to save other men who might trust you."

The awful thing about it was his absolute sincerity. He meant his words to the very letter, as Prentiss could see, and nothing would shake his purpose. And it was just, bitterly just.

MERRIAM could not sleep. The claw marks burned across his chest, but the face of Prentiss seemed etched in his brain as though by acid. For a long time he lay seeking sleep, then rose and got into straw slippers and dressing gown.

He walked out into the big living room, where a single lamp burned, and he stopped short at sight of Prentiss beside the light, half dressed.

"Not trying to get away, are you?" he asked.

To his astonishment, Prentiss laughed. The man seemed quite himself, as though all tension had left him. His laugh rang true. His gaze was composed, entirely at ease.

"Hardly, old chap," he returned. "I've been thinking."

Merriam grunted, dropped into a chair, reached for a cigarette. Prentiss leaned forward, and a smile touched his thin, hard lips.

"Don't mind if I talk, do you?" he said. "You're a harder man than I thought you, Merriam; hard as steel. Quite all right. You know, all this business has rather opened my eyes. To myself, I mean."

"High time," said Merriam, but for the life of him could not make the words bite.

"Yes," agreed Prentiss. "But I'm talking of the past only. The future's all settled; I've made up my mind about that. I've always been a rotter, always made excuses, closed my eyes to reality. This time it's no go. Facts bulk large. There's a lot you don't understand, Merriam, a lot you don't know. You'll learn before long, though."

Merriam frowned, slightly puzzled, yet felt as though the taut restraint between the two of them had been suddenly swept away. Prentiss reached for a cigarette, too, and after lighting it leaned back and regarded Merriam calmly, reflectively.

"You know, I've always been damned. Weak strain somewhere; too much imagination. Fine family and all that. Always was popular, and it went to my head. Time after time, things happened; temptation that I couldn't resist. It burned in me, and the weak strain always cropped up. The family knew I was a bad egg and—and a certain girl knew. No one else. At last the governor got me this post with the customs service and shipped me out here. And it's the same old story. Always something worse than the time before, but now it's passed all bounds. Murder this time; first you, then Ngan. You don't know all the reasons, either."

He carefully knocked the ash from his cigarette, his fingers as steady as his voice.

"I've been through hell since yesterday," he said, looking directly at Merriam. "In my intent, at least, I deliberately murdered you. I envied you, more than you know. Those damned rubies! This is the limit, Merriam; the

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limit of endurance, of suffering, of realization. When you said I was a menace to decent men, you spoke the truth. No shirking it. And nothing will do me any good."

"Nothing?" Merriam stirred a little as he spoke.

"Nothing. The girl might have changed things, but refused to try. She knew! The bad streak has corrupted the good; like a rotten apple in a barrel of good ones. The race is run."

Merriam regarded him intently, perceiving his earnestness, and sat there with impulse fighting against cold resolve. Suddenly Merriam realized it was not impulse at all, but something deeper and truer and steadier. Then he broke the silence.

"The Chinese are wise," he observed slowly. "You know their idea about six directions; our own four cardinal points of the compass, plus two more. One up, one down. There's a lot in that, Prentiss. We usually miss it. Few of us head either up or down, deliberately."

"Meaning what?" The brows of Prentiss lifted quizzically.

"I've changed my mind about exposing you," said Merriam abruptly. "I think you're over the mountains, have wakened to yourself. Wouldn't do me a damned bit of good to ruin you. I doubt if it would do others any good. You're heading up. Keep on, win back the lost ground!"

Prentiss stared blankly, flushed, then paled a little.

"This is a bit sudden," he said. "You're wrong. You don't savvy; you haven't a lifetime of such stuff behind you. Corrosion that has gone too deep to be wiped away like surface rust—"

"Forget it," broke in Merriam, his gaze steady, unimpassioned, determined. "We'll just go into the city, turn over the stuff to the consul, and forget what's passed. Let the dead bury their dead; start fresh. Can do? Then it's settled."

A wry grimace twisted the lips of Prentiss. He started to speak, checked himself. Merriam rose and clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's good to have things cleared up! Let's make a cup of tea, get a bite to eat, and then turn in. Must be off early, you know."

Prentiss nodded and accompanied him from the room. But in going, he glanced at the silver-framed photograph, and an ironic smile crept into his dark eyes.

Morning saw them up and off with the sun, Ngan riding with them as far as Wuting on business of his own. He led the way, Merriam followed, Prentiss brought up the rear.

Halfway to the town they came to the Black Dragon gorge—a deep, abrupt chasm in the hills, crossed by a bamboo bridge that sagged and bounced and swayed beneath them. As Merriam approached the far side, he saw Ngan glance around, then freeze. He turned. The mule of Prentiss was following, was two-thirds across the bridge—but there was no sign of Prentiss except the folded paper fastened to the leather of the saddle with a pin.

In a flash, Merriam realized the truth, and looked down into the gorge.

"FELL from his mule, eh?" said Doctor Aintree, after hearing it all from Merriam's lips. "Or so you told the consul. What did he say?"

"Nothing," said Merriam. "He shrugged."

"Aye," and Aintree nodded complete understanding.

The two men were at lunch together.

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Beside Merriam, on the table, was the bundle containing the rubies. He touched it awkwardly.

"I've got to turn this over to the British consul—"

"No!" Aintree leaned forward. "Losh, man, will ye listen? Scindia was captured two days ago, at the border; he's on his way to Rangoon for execution. The man ye found was another, d'ye mind? Don't be wasting good rubies on any British consul!"

Merriam's eyes widened. "Is that true? Good Lord!" He drew a quick breath of relief, laughed awkwardly. "You don't know what it means, doctor—now I have the money, now I can chuck this job at the mine to-day, instantly—start off north—"

Aintree frowned. "Eh? Are ye that sort to chuck your job because ye've found these stones, lad?"

"No, because there's something vastly greater to be found—and they'll pay the way." Merriam extended a folded paper. "Read this. It was pinned to Prentiss's saddle; it explains everything."

Aintree donned his spectacles, opened the paper, read it:

MY DEAR MERRIAM:

I said there's a lot you don't know. Ann didn't chuck you for me; she knew the truth about me, turned me down hard and cold after your divorce. She's always loved you. Last I heard, she had forced her family to pitch in and help, and was heading for China. She didn't know where to find you, but swore she would. She's somewhere up north now, hunting for you. I heard her say once that if she could talk to you for five minutes, everything would be different.

And I envied you. That's one reason—well, you understand. So long. Finders keepers, you know.

PALMER CLARKE, ALIAS PRENTISS.

Doctor Aintree looked up excitedly.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "So this is why! And you're chucking the job and going—I'm glad, laddie, mortal glad! But China's a terrible large place, and ye don't know where to look for her—"

Merriam burst into a great laugh.

"No, no, doctor, you're away off! The whole of China, and half Asia to boot, is only a little place, a small place, the tiniest place on earth—now!"

THE END.

Bearding the Russians

RUSSIA was strictly an Oriental land until Peter the Great forcibly Westernized it. That at first proved very hard to do. One of the Boyars, or all-powerful landowners, was so incensed by the unwelcome reforms that he bluntly shouted in the presence of the Czar's officers: "We old Russians shall stick to our customs as long as fluent beards will hang from our chins!"

When that was reported to Peter he instantly ordered that the Boyars should shave themselves. He personally made a tour of the Kremlin Palace at the head of a group of barbers and guards, running after the bearded noblemen, who were forcibly thrown to the ground, shaven one by one, pulled from their flowing robes and clad in the Western clothes of the time.

Strange as it may seem, that wholesale execution of beards totally broke the spirit of the old Russian die-hards, who reconciled themselves to the wishes of the Czar.

Armand Brigaud.

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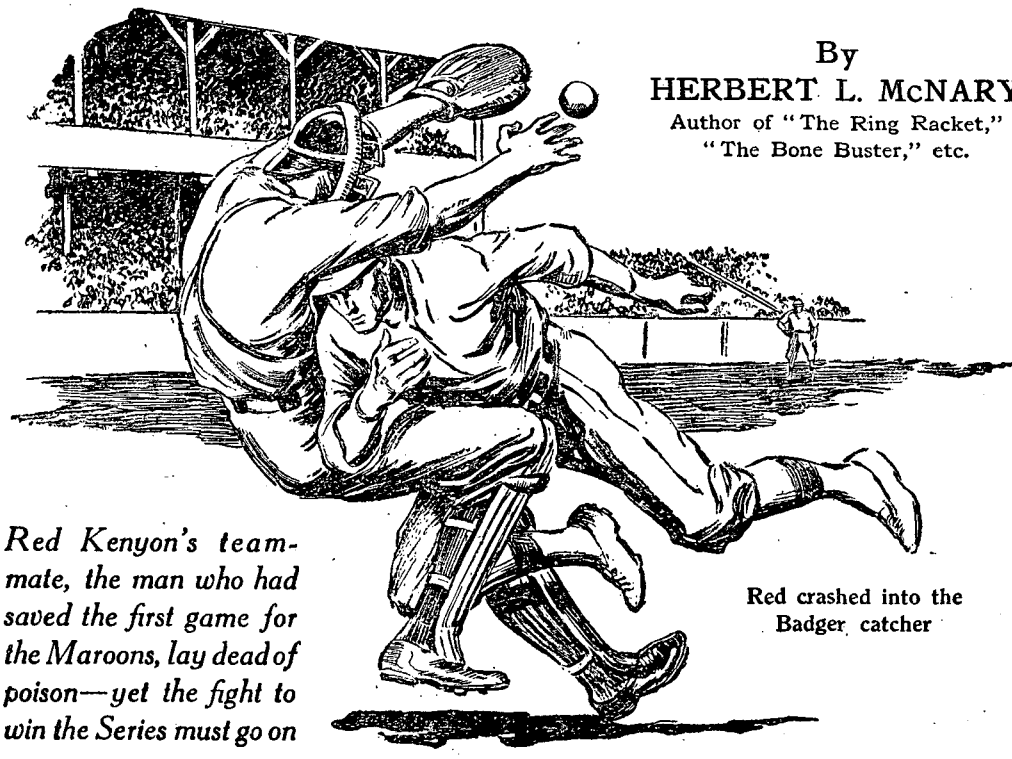
The World Series Murders

By
HERBERT L. McNARY
Author of "The Ring Racket," "The Bone Buster," etc.



Red crashed into the Badger catcher

Red Kenyon's teammate, the man who had saved the first game for the Maroons, lay dead of poison—yet the fight to win the Series must go on

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

GOSSIP that there was trouble between the members of the Maroon team seemed borne out during the first game with the Badgers in the World Series. Steck, the star pitcher, and Butch Hampson, the catcher, got their signals mixed up; and it looked as though this was Butch's fault. He seemed to have done it deliberately, though no one could figure out why he should. Steck became furious, tried to beat Butch up, and was finally taken from the game.

The game seems lost, until the peppery Red Kenyon succeeds in upsetting and unnerving the Badger pitcher, Grunt Turner, with his brilliant but erratic playing; which gives Butch Hampson a chance to make a lucky home run in the ninth inning. This play hands the game to the Maroons.

Red Kenyon shares his hotel room with another player, Ranny Carlton. In Room 319, which is next to Red's and Ranny's, is Butch Hampson; and between the two rooms is a bathroom which all three use. Until now, Butch has shared his room with Bert Steck; but after the difficulties between these two players during the afternoon, Steck has insisted upon moving into another room, leaving the old room in Butch's possession.

During the course of the evening

This story began in the Argosy for August 20.

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Red overhears a conversation, through the bathroom doors, which Butch holds with some one who is evidently talking from the lobby of the hotel. Butch declares that he will not throw the Series, and that he will not be bribed or intimidated. Some one obviously is threatening his life, but he laughs at them. Red has a vague suspicion that a shifty gambler named Slip Fegler is on the other end of the wire.

Not long afterward, Manager Mike McHale runs into Red's room yelling that some one has poisoned Butch. It is learned that during the day Steck had purchased a package of bicarbonate of soda for Butch, who was having trouble with his stomach. The furtive-eyed little trainer, Squeak Tierney, had recommended bicarbonate in the first place, and it was Squeak who had attempted to deliver the package to Butch. Not finding the catcher in, Squeak had left the package with the hotel clerk downstairs. For a time the package of bicarbonate had stood in the bathroom, so that Red and Carlton also might have had access to it. Some one, somehow, has put poison in the powder, for Butch had died shortly after taking his first dose of the medicine. There are a number of suspects, of whom Red is one of the most important, inasmuch as he is by profession a druggist. Muriel Canning, the daughter of the owner of the club, also has a knowledge of chemicals, being a professional laboratory assistant. Because of their enthusiasm, she and her father are with the team.

During the hubbub that follows Butch's death, the hotel manager and the house detective are in Room 319, questioning every one connected with the team. Red goes into the bathroom for a moment, and there to his amazement discovers Muriel Canning in hiding. Swiftly he helps her to escape into his room, and on out into the hallway. But a detective finds her handbag in the bathroom a few minutes later, and it is only by snapping out the lights, snatching up the bag and socking the house detective on the jaw, then dashing into the bathroom and on into his own room, that Red is able to prevent him from identifying the bag as Muriel's.

CHAPTER V *(Continued).*

THE HANDBAG.

RED stopped as he saw some one coming into the room through the corridor door. Then he recognized Ranny Carlton, his roommate.

"Here, take this," he exclaimed, thrusting the bag into Ranny's hands. "Hide it here in our room some place, and don't ask any questions."

He sped back through the darkened bathroom and into Room 319. Ball players were struggling about the door, and now, as the light was snapped on again, Red joined the confused group.

The house detective rose from the floor, holding his jaw. "Who slugged me?" he demanded, his eyes flaming with resentment.

"I think," declared the hotel manager, "we had better ascertain who turned out the light, and why."

"Why?" repeated the house detective. "I'll tell you why.—Because they wanted that bag. Who took it? Which one of you guys got it?"

"Sweeney," called the hotel manager sharply, "let me handle this." He turned to the wondering group of players. "Gentlemen, this is serious business. Who took that handbag?"

None answered, and he turned to Mike McHale.

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"Mr. McHale, I shall have to ask you to give Sweeney the names of your ball players who were in the room at the time the light went out. This is a matter for the police."

"I can only tell you those who are here now," declared McHale. "I can't remember any one who might have got out."

He called the names of the men, and Sweeney wrote them down in a note book. Then the detective searched those present, a simple process in most instances, since many of the Maroons were clad only in pajamas.

The house detective was making a thorough search of the room for possible hiding places into which the missing handbag might have been thrust when the medical examiner and the detective from the homicide squad put in their appearance.

Red's first impression of Detective Pat Harrigan was unfavorable; but had he only known it, many another had made a similar initial mistake, only to regret it later. Pat Harrigan was a big man who had come up from the ranks of patrolmen, and looked it. He wore a blue serge suit, badly in need of pressing, and on the vest was a careless smear of cigar ashes. The cigar he held in the rather pudgy fingers of a left hand; one end of the cigar indicated that the weed was used as much for chewing as smoking. His round, rather fleshy face wore a look of self assurance, exhibiting none of the shrewdness which Red expected to find in a detective. The dark, somewhat small, eyes revealed no cunning, merely a frank and somewhat crude curiosity. A strong nose and a somewhat pugnacious chin indicated persistence. A well restricted waistline counteracted the appearance of carelessness. He removed a black derby to reveal black hair, smoothed to cover an expansive bald spot.

Many a criminal had held Pat Harrigan and his cumbersome methods in contempt, only to pay for it later. His associates could have told Red, or any one who was interested, that his methods were slow but thorough.

Just at present Harrigan appeared more interested in the verdict than in solving the mystery associated with the death. Assisting the medical examiner, he asked a few general questions. But the house detective wanted to talk.

"I found a lady's handbag in the bathroom, and some guy turned out the lights and socked me and stole the bag. Look where he hit me," and he pointed to his jaw.

"Better put some liniment on it," suggested Harrigan unsympathetically.

The medical examiner inspected the bicarbonate of soda, the glass and the spoon, and listened understandingly as the hotel manager stressed the unfortunate publicity that would result and McHale expressed the effect the tragedy would have on the Maroons' world series chances.

The medical examiner turned to the detective. "Considering the deceased, Pat, and the parties involved, I think I'd better make a tentative report of 'death, probably accidental,' pending investigation of how this stuff got into the bicarb."

"Okay, Doc.—What is the stuff, anyway?"

"I'm not quite sure." He turned and looked at the covered form on the floor. "Went out pretty quickly, though. Must have had a bum ticker." He looked at McHale. "Hampson had a reputation for hitting it up, didn't he?"

"His habits weren't the strictest," replied the Maroons' manager, "but I

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wouldn't like to bring that out, now that he's dead."

"Sure. I'll have to hold an autopsy, anyhow. Well, Pat, it's your case now. Hope you can prove my tentative report to be the final one."

"Hope so, Doc.—See you later."

THE medical examiner went out, and Harrigan stood rolling his cold cigar in his mouth, seemingly at a loss what to do next. However, Harrigan did things in his own way, and with deceptive casualness.

"Who discovered Hampson?" he asked.

When McHale stated that he had, Harrigan asked a few short questions which, though perfunctory as they were, covered the ground completely.—What time? Why had the manager come to the room?

This brought in Red Kenyon. Harrigan looked at Red so long without speaking that the latter shifted uneasily. Yet there was nothing in Harrigan's look to disturb Red, no sign of accusation or suspicion. Again, it was as if Harrigan didn't know quite how to proceed. But that very apparent inability was what put Red on the defensive—as it had many another.

"Where were you?"

"In my room, next door." Red's answer had been short and defiant. The pugnacious, colorful Red, who argued with umpires, revealed itself here. Harrigan took his cigar out of his mouth.

"Oh. Hard-boiled, huh?—How long were you next door before Mr. McHale called you?"

"Since before nine o'clock."

"Hear any suspicious sounds?"

Red hesitated. Those eyes appeared to be looking through him; and yet their gaze was more blank than penetrating.

"I heard lots of sounds. I can't recall that any of them would be classed as suspicious."

"Well, scratch that red thatch of yours, between now and to-morrow. Maybe you'll think of something." Harrigan turned to the hotel employees. It was the night clerk who provided the most interesting information. The clerk recalled that the Maroons' trainer, Squeak Tierney, had brought him the bicarbonate of soda to give to Hampson. Instead, he had given it to Hampson's roommate, Steck. Later, Steck had come and asked to be assigned to a different room. The clerk had read the newspaper account of how Steck and Hampson had nearly come to blows during the ball game.

Harrigan asked McHale and Red a few questions on this angle, and then excused them.

"All right, you two can go. I want to talk to the hotel people, and to Sweeney, especially."

RED went into his own room, and found Carlton waiting for him there.

"Coop has told me that Butch has been poisoned.—What's the latest dope?"

"I can't tell you now. Where's that handbag?"

Carlton hesitated. "You'd better think twice, Red. It's pretty serious business, concealing evidence. You'd better turn it over to the police."

"Turn it over, hell!"

"It makes you an accessory after the fact."

"I don't care what it makes me! Give me that bag."

Reluctantly, Carlton took the bag from beneath the mattress and handed it to Red.

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"I think you're making a great mistake, Red. Keep me out of this."

"Don't worry. You're the only one who knows I have this."

Red opened the door and glanced out, and then swiftly moved down the corridor, with the bag under his arm. He turned the corridor towards the front of the hotel, to the rooms occupied by President Canning and his party. In the visit that afternoon to the owner's suite, Red had been able to guess which room was Muriel's.

He gave three soft knocks on the door. After an anxious pause he heard a frightened question, "Who's there?"

"Red," he whispered.

Another seemingly long wait, and the door opened enough to reveal Muriel, in negligée, her face pale, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Muriel, is this yours?"

"Oh!" she gasped and clutched the bag. She looked up with eyes moist and lips quivering. "Dave—"

"Not now.—I can't risk being seen here. I think I've covered you up. Remember, you don't know anything. And for Pete's sake hide or destroy that bag. Don't use it again." And he hurried back to his room.

But he couldn't escape Carlton. The third string catcher sat on the edge of the bed and plied him with questions, until Red shut him up by insisting he had told all he knew. He hadn't, but he feared he might talk too much if Carlton persisted.

Again a knock sounded on the door, and this time Harrigan entered.

"Want to check up on the bathroom from your side," he declared.

He noticed Carlton. "What's your name?"

Carlton told him, and Harrigan consulted a list, evidently Sweeney's, Red reflected, or a copy.

"Where were you during the fuss next door?"

"Down in the lobby," stated Carlton easily. "At least, I only returned a short while ago, as Red will tell you."

Harrigan looked at Red for assurance, and then chewed his cigar. He went into the bathroom and came out again in a moment or two.

"Was the door on your side locked all the time?"

"I can't say," answered Red.

Harrigan stared at Red with disconcerting frankness. "I understand you and Hampson had a break over a jane."

Red flushed indignantly, and then quickly thought that Harrigan had planned to trap him.

"If you want to frame it that way, suit yourself."

"Who said anything about framing?" chuckled Harrigan. "Well, that's that!"

At the door, Harrigan turned and put his cigar in his mouth. "Oh, Red, what kind of handbags does Miss Canning carry?"

Red almost choked. "Wh—what?—How should I know? She's probably got a carload of 'em."

"Yeah. With her dough, I s'pose she has.—Well, happy dreams!"

"Pretty dumb detective," declared Carlton after the door closed.

"I'm not so sure," stated Red with a worried frown.

CHAPTER VI.

FINGER PRINTS.

WHEN Red awoke the next morning, it was to find that as early as he had meant to rise, his roommate had beaten him to it. Fully dressed, Carlton sat on the

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other bed, reading copies of the morning editions.

"What do they say?" exclaimed Red anxiously. For answer, Carlton passed him one of the newspapers.

"They say it was an accident. A druggist, or some one else mixed some kind of poison with the bicarbonate of soda."

"No druggist would mix poison with bicarbonate of soda!" declared Red, loyal to his profession.

Carlton smiled. "The druggist speaking.—But you guys are human, and can make mistakes. Anyway, that's what the papers say. Maybe it's only camouflage."

Red picked up the paper. The Maroons' victory had been crowded out of the box headlines by the sensational death of the man whose home run in the ninth the previous day had made this victory possible. Apparently the newspapers accepted the tentative verdict of accidental death with reservations. There was a vague hint of suicide, and only a slightly more remote suggestion of murder. Both of these suggestions were linked up with the previous rumors of a gamblers' clique which had a vital interest in the series.

One writer outlined several hypothetical suppositions:

> We must remember that Hampson's defensive play contrasted surprisingly with his slugging. His pitcher, Bert Steck, thought so at least. Then there was that wild pitch over which Steck and Hampson nearly came to blows. Obviously, it was caused by a misunderstanding of signals. There have been rumors about Slip Fegler and a syndicate which is betting heavily on the Badgers. Fear of exposure is always a reason for suicide. But we must recall that Hampson won the game in the final inning. Perhaps gangland took revenge. But if so, in a manner decidedly different from the usual machine gun and pineapple methods. In any event, the loss of Hampson, and the depressive influence it would have on the Maroons' playing, automatically installs the Badgers as favorites, thus playing into the hands of any clique who might be backing the Badgers to win.

RED absorbed this article and everything else pertaining to the tragedy; and to his great relief, nowhere did he find anything implicating Muriel Canning.

"Well," declared Carlton, laying aside the papers, "that's a tough break Butch got. It means more work for us. Who do you suppose will get the catching assignment to-day?"

"Why, I'll get the call over you," exclaimed Red. "I have all season."

"I guess so.—But suppose that dumb detective found out that you had that bag last night. What chance would you have to do any catching to-day—or in the Series? Not that it will make much difference, because this tragedy just about knocks us out of the running anyway."

"Yeah?" Red's chin set grimly. "If the team has any nerve, they'll win because of this."

But Red spoke with a fighting spirit which not all of his mates possessed. The average age of ball players is twenty to thirty years. Death is something that only with great rarity comes into their professional lives. Hence, when it came into the World Series with such dramatic and mysterious suddenness, it left the Maroons stunned. This was manifest to any one who watched the young athletes as they came down to breakfast this morning of the second game, and stared bewildered at newspapers. Butch Hampson, the man who had won the game for them only yesterday afternoon was dead. It just wasn't credible.

But the Maroons were to find out how true Butch's death was. As members of the team, they were summoned

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to the owner's suite that morning. They trudged into the room, clear-eyed, clean-skinned, but with questioning expressions, and an air that was somewhat beaten and dispirited. They found Harrigan teetering in a chair behind a flat table, a cigar that might have been the same one he had been chewing on the night before poking out from his clenched teeth. With him was a young officer, some paraphernalia spread out on the table in front of him. These things, Red quickly learned were for finger printing.

"All the ball players here?" asked Harrigan of McHale.

"Yes," replied the manager, after what to Red appeared a momentary hesitation.

A baseball manager's job is always a tough proposition; and no man in baseball had suffered more vicissitudes than the prematurely gray Mike McHale. Red understood that the skipper's private and family life had not been the happiest; but one did not inquire about such intimate things. With Mike and his players, it was always baseball—every minute of the time from the first fungo of spring training to the last put out of the season.

To-day, Red noted that Mike's face appeared more haggard than ever. There were new shadows beneath the dark gray eyes, new lines on the seamed, leathery cheeks.

"Boys," explained the detective in a casual manner, "I'm sorry to detain you, but it seems that plenty of you guys were parading in and out of Room 319 last night. I gotta take some finger prints, so form in line an' get it over with."

One by one, the ball players placed their inky impressions upon the form given them by the headquarters man. With an expert glance at the apparently meaningless whorls and lines, this young officer divided the forms into two piles.

Harrigan watched the process, occasionally picking up one of the prints from the smaller pile and glancing at it. But when Red came up to the table, Harrigan brought his feet down on the floor and looked the red-haired one full in the face, much after the fashion of the "barbers" of opposing teams who sought to get his goat.

"Well, here's the wise cracker himself," grunted Harrigan. "I'll want to lamp your prints."

"Put 'em in a glass frame, if they'll do you any good!" retorted Red as he inked his fingers and made the impressions in the spaces designated.

Harrigan looked at the paper and then passed it over to the finger print man with a questioning look. The other studied the prints briefly, and then nodded.

HARRIGAN sat back and squinted through his cigar smoke, in a manner that disconcerted Red.

"Well, Red," he declared finally, "it looks like you were walkin' all over Room 319 on your hands."

"I was one of the first to know about the—accident."

"First?"

"I said *one* of the first," snapped Red.

"My error," but Harrigan hardly appeared apologetic. There was a teasing smile on his face, as if he enjoyed bantering Red; but an inner voice told the catcher not to lose his temper, that Harrigan was trying for just that end. Harrigan continued to stare at Red, who gave him glare for glare.

Suddenly the detective shot a question at him. "And what were you

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doin' there in Butch Hampson's bathroom?"

For a moment, the mental pins were knocked from under Red; and that was something umpires seldom were able to do. Red stood there, an open-mouthed picture of confusion, before a natural and logical explanation popped into his mind.

"Why, it's the bathroom to my room, too, isn't it?"

Harrigan slowly put the cigar back in his mouth, still staring at Red.

"That's right—it is," he agreed. But that aggravating smile spread. He glanced in the direction of Ranny Carlton. "Your roommate, there, also left a few fingerprints—though not as many as you. That's all for now, Red."

The disconcerted Red stepped aside, and the remaining players gave their finger impressions. The last to do so was Manager McHale himself. Harrigan studied his prints as he had Red's and Carlton's, and put them in the same pile. Then he looked at the manager, brows contracted.

"Are these all your players?" he demanded.

"Yes, you can check 'em with the roster."

Harrigan's frown deepened and he passed the cards to the officer.

"Look these over again," he directed.

The officer did so, briefly but expertly, and at the end he shook his head. Red had noticed that the smaller pile contained besides his own and Carlton's and McHale's, the prints of Steck, Benson, Paley, Cooper and the other players whom Red knew to have been in Room 319 the night before.

"No luck?" asked Harrigan.

"No, Mr. McHale's are the only ones in the same classification."

"Well, that's that," declared Harrigan in a philosophical manner. One advantage Harrigan had over his contemporaries was his ability to take a disappointment without annoyance, and to immediately start out anew.

"That's all, boys. Wish you luck for this afternoon—even if I am supposed to be a Badger rooter."

The detective and his assistant departed; and soon afterward, Red and his troubled mates left for the ball park. The game must go on, according to schedule. The great World Series could not be held up—not even for the murder of one of the players.

CHAPTER VII.

SQUEAK ENTERS THE CASE.

THE Maroons reached the ball park, where already the fans were milling through the turnstiles and discussing excitedly the startling tragedy which had removed the Maroons' slugging ace from the picture.

Red went into the locker room with the rest of his mates and commenced to divest himself of his street clothes. Squeak, the trainer, passed by, carrying his ample bag of first aid materials. He almost tripped over Red's crossed legs. Because he was interested in such things, Red had previously taken notice of Squeak's large variety of liniments and salves. He knew that Squeak was something of a bug on such things. On more than one occasion he had asked Red questions pertaining to drugs. Squeak had endeavored to distribute a liniment of his own concoction, but he lacked the funds required to put it over. He was always hoping to win this necessary money from the horse races, or on some big lottery pool.

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Red, like most of the Maroons, kidded Squeak about his liniment and his experiments, but now Red suddenly saw a new field of probability. Squeak had carried on a lot of secret business with Butch, but Red had supposed he was acting as a medium for placing surreptitious bets on the races for Butch, just as he did for others, Cooper, Carlton and Paley and any one foolish enough to think he could beat the game.

"Hey, Squeak!" called Red.

The trainer turned a pair of eyes more bloodshot than usual. "Squeak, why did you recommend bicarbonate of soda to Butch?"

The trainer dropped his bag in acute agitation, and startled Red by his burst of emotion.

"Who said I did?" he cried in the rasping tone of voice that occasioned his clubhouse name.

"Why, *you* said you did, yesterday afternoon in President Canning's room when Steck handed a package to Butch."

The trainer stared wide-eyed at Red before he answered. "Well, he said his stomach was upset. It's the best thing to take, isn't it? You ought to know. You're a druggist."

"It's as good as anything," evaded Red. "How long has he been taking it?"

"Cripes, I don't know. A coupla weeks, maybe. What's the idea of cross-examinin' me?"

"Hell, what are you gettin' so burned up about? I'm just tryin' to get a little information that might help solve the mystery about Butch."

Squeak stared at Red as if seeing a ghost. "Well," he almost snarled at last, "you won't get any from me."

He picked up his bag and continued on, while Red stared after him with a puzzled frown. Why had Squeak been so agitated? Of course he was a queer fellow anyway; pretty good as a trainer, but there were plenty of others as good or better. Many had wondered why McHale held on to him. Pity seemed to be the explanation. No one knew much about Squeak's antecedents.

Red gave up cudgeling his brain over Squeak for the time being, making the mental reservation that Squeak was a queer chap anyway, and that he might possibly be worried because he had recommended the bicarbonate of soda to Butch, and that whatever had been mixed with the bicarb was responsible for Butch's death.

WHEN the Maroons came out for infield practice, it was Red Kenyon who stood at home plate and whipped the ball around the bases. It was he who would have to fill the shoes of the sensational Butch Hampson. And yet no man on the Maroon squad could have been less disconcerted by the task. It was not the game that would bother Red so much as the memory of Harrigan and that disconcerting, challenging smile of his; those provocative eyes behind the smoke screen of a foul smelling cigar. How much did Harrigan know? How much would he find out?

How much did he, himself, know? Red reflected as he snapped the ball to second. In the first place, Red discounted the death as accidental. He wanted desperately to believe this; but Red knew that poison did not accidentally get into a trade package of bicarbonate of soda.

That left only the suicide and murder theories, reasoned Red as he took the throw home from Shannon. He could eliminate the suicide theory right away . . .

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The coach tapped the ball in front of the plate. Red instinctively chased after it, and whipped the ball to Paley, on first, without even breaking his trend of thought. Even admitting that Butch had some reason to commit suicide and that he had gone as far as planning to do so, it was unlikely that he would have devised this particular method. There had been nothing subtle or ingenious about Butch. Of course, he had upon several occasions visited Red's drug store and had asked questions; but this had usually been out of curiosity, or merely as an excuse to bid for "medicinal spirits." That opened up a new line of thought. Red took a throw from Barstick on third, and whipped the ball down to Shannon, covering second.

Almost every man on the team, at some time or other, had visited Red's drug store or had talked drugs. Whenever they had a pain or ache they consulted him, as if he held a medical degree. Had he unwittingly supplied the knowledge of the poison, whatever it was, to some one who had later brought about Butch's death?

That idea, of course, would mean that Butch had died at the hand of a murderer. But who?

Red dropped a throw, picked up the ball and handed it to Kelly, the coach. His mind reverted to the night before. Who, to his knowledge, had been in Room 319 just before Butch had been found dead? Steck for one. But the same sort of reasoning that had eliminated the suicide theory in Red's opinion removed Steck from consideration. There might be motive. There might be circumstantial evidence. But Steck would never use a drug. He was no more subtle than Butch. If he so far forgot himself as to kill, he would have used a gun.

Red threw wildly to second, the ball rolling to center . . .

"Say, what's eatin' you?" protested Kelly. "You're a mile away."

"I'm all right," grunted Red; but his mind still scratched for answers to the mystery.

The use of poison suggested some one with a knowledge of chemistry.—Knowledge of chemistry?—Muriel Canning! Muriel had been in Butch's room, for Red had encountered her in the bathroom and had helped her to escape through his own room. No, it was as impossible to think of Muriel committing murder as it was to accuse himself.

Himself?—A return throw got away from him, and he chased the ball to the grandstand.

Cold sweat formed in beads along his brow. He saw the calculating eyes of Pat Harrigan, the detective. Did Harrigan suspect *him?* Why not? He was a licensed apothecary. He was known to be at odds with Butch. The jealousy motive—jealousy over Muriel. Jealousy because Butch had all the catching and reaped all the glory. He had been alone in the room next to Hampson, and had had easy access to Room 319. It wouldn't have been necessary to go to the room. The bicarbonate of soda had been open there in the bathroom. Any one could have put the poison into it. Mike McHale could testify that he had seen Hampson come out of the bathroom with a package in his hand the last moment he saw him alive.

For the first time, Red really saw the web that might be woven about him. Carlton had been right about the handbag. He'd have to watch his step. Yet he couldn't have acted otherwise, where Muriel's welfare and peace of mind were concerned.

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But, for that matter, it was equally possible that Ranny Carlton might have put the poison into the bicarbonate. Red loathed himself for thinking this. Though he had no particular love for Carlton, they were nevertheless roommates, and Red's instinctive sense of decency and loyalty made him feel a little guilty about suspecting Carlton. Nevertheless he couldn't avoid the fact that Carlton, just as much as Red himself, had access to the bathroom between the two rooms. Carlton might easily have slipped into the bathroom, before Red came up to the room after supper.

Red went back to the plate, and avoided Kelly's scrutinizing gaze.

There was also Squeak Tierney, he remembered. Where did he fit into the mystery? And even Mike McHale. He was sure that the manager knew something. He had not been entirely frank with Harrigan. Red knew that, even if Harrigan didn't.

THE warning bell sounded the end of the Maroons' practice session, to Red's relief.

In front of the Maroons' dugout, Carlton had been warming up Lefty Becker, the chucker selected by McHale to twirl the second game. Red now relieved Carlton in taking the final warm-up pitches of the elongated southpaw. Red noted with pleasure that Lefty's fast ball had all its old hop, and that his curve broke like an inverted L.

The Maroons would have to win. If the Badgers won the series now, and it came out that the gamblers were down on the Badgers for heavy dough, Butch's death would become even more sinister. Every one involved in this thing, Muriel, her father, the whole team, would be dragged through the muck and mire of headlines. No, whatever else happened, the Badgers must not win the Series.

But wouldn't the same hand that had eliminated Butch Hampson be cunningly working to prevent the Maroons winning? One who would go so far as to commit murder would not hesitate to kill again, if necessary.

The managers went out to the plate to confer and to present their line-ups.

CHAPTER VIII.

HARRIGAN PAYS A CALL.

RED took Lefty's final warm-up fast ball, and it thudded into his glove with the sound of a cracking rifle. Then he walked the few steps to the bench. The white-uniformed Badgers came out of their dugout and ran to their positions. A cheer, rising from forty thousand throats, voiced encouragement; but the cheer was not so spontaneous as on the day before. The sudden death of yesterday's hero had cast a pall over the Series. There was no escaping that fact.

McHale came back from the plate, and at the sight of another figure among his men, stopped short just as he reached the concrete steps.

"Hello, boys. Like to have a little company?"

Red knew that voice. So did Mike McHale. The somewhat diminutive manager froze in his tracks, and then flushed with anger, as he scowled at Detective Pat Harrigan.

"Nobody not connected with the game is permitted on the bench," snapped McHale.

"I got special privileges," explained Harrigan with an easy gesture of the hand that held the inevitable half-smoked cigar.

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"Aren't things bad enough," flamed McHale, "without you hangin' around like a crape? What are you tryin' to do—play into the hands of the gamblers by crabbin' the Series for the Badgers?"

"Which is more important, a World Series or a murder?—Maybe you can blame yourself for the interruption. I merely dropped in to see if all your players were at that finger-printing session this morning." His eyes roved over the men on the bench with a photographic technique gained by years of studying countless lineups and police circulars. His glance settled upon the cowering Squeak, at the far end of the bench.

"Who's that guy at the end there?" asked Harrigan, indicating Squeak with his cigar.

Red noticed that McHale appeared very much disconcerted.

"Why—that's our trainer," the manager answered.

"Where was he this morning?"

"You said ball players.—He's only the trainer."

"That so? Well, maybe there's a technical difference; but me, I never liked technicalities. I meant every one connected with the team. I think I'll take this guy's prints, just to be on the safe side." And he climbed over the legs of the ball players.

BENSON was already up at the plate, waiting for the Badger pitcher, Denning, to throw the first one, and hoping it would be a ball. Denning had taken his signal and was now starting his windup. Maroon coaches on third and first shook their fists and pleaded for a hit. A catcher waited to take the place of one who had stood there the day before, one who would never draw on a catcher's mitt again. And on the bench a detective sought a murderer!

It had occurred to Red that Harrigan had come here for the definite purpose of securing Squeak Tierney's finger prints. There were Maroons out in the bull pen, two coaches on the line. Harrigan paid no attention to them. Casually, he pulled out of his pocket an ordinary stamp pad and thrust it before the white-faced Squeak, as though offering him a cigarette.

"Stick your fingers on this."

Squeak stared at the pad as if its touch meant death, as perhaps it might, for all that anybody else knew. Then, compelled by Harrigan's steady gaze, Squeak placed his fingers on the ink pad and transferred the impression to a paper held by the detective.

Harrigan glanced at this paper, and dried it by waving it back and forth, meanwhile holding his cigar in exposed, clenched teeth.

"Guess I'll scram now, boys. Sorry to have disturbed you."

He went as quickly as he had come, leaving a trainer who was almost in a state of collapse, and a manager not much better.

"This is terrible!" exclaimed McHale. "And we're supposed to win ball games!"

"We've got to win 'em," exclaimed Red impulsively. "Every man on this team has got to play as he never played before. We've *got* to come through!"

But the two men who followed Benson to bat failed to share Red's enthusiasm. Both men died at first, on rather easy infield chances.

Red donned his spangles and jogged out to the plate. He took five pitches from Lefty Becker, and slammed the fifth on the line to Shorty Shannon, covering second. Then Red turned around and picked up his mask. As

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he straightened up, he glanced toward the owner's box as if a pair of velvet brown eyes had magnetized him. At any rate, he found Muriel looking at him; and the look sent a tingle of encouragement racing through his veins.

They were in a tight spot, but they would pull out. Lefty, working as smoothly as if nothing unusual had happened to mar the beautiful October day, burned four pitches into Red's glove. The umpire divided them evenly. The Badger lead-off man swung hard at a fast ball, and bit under it. A looping Texas Leaguer soared over the infield. Second, short and center converged upon the ball, and then suddenly all three stopped. The ball fell safe, and the batter slid into second. An out advanced him.

With the infield drawn in to cut off the run, the next Badger smashed the ball past Paley. The ball rolled to deep foul territory, and a mad fandom cheered the runner on to third base. It looked like the Maroons had cracked, especially when the next batter caught the ball on the nose. The apple went like a bullet to Lenant, in deep right. He made the catch, and then whipped the ball towards the plate as the Badger on third darted home.

Barstick, on third, took the ball and too late whirled to relay it home—no, not too late. As the runner dove for the plate, Red squatted down. The Badger runner crashed into Red, spikes first, and stopped dead. The ball thudded into Red's glove and he slapped it on the runner, momentarily stunned by the crash.

The Badgers led by a run, but Red got that back. With one down, he hit an ordinary single to center. He rounded first at full speed, and with a beautiful fallaway slide he hooked the bag for a double. A single to right followed. Red leaped away with the pitch, disregarding the coach's advice to hold up at third, and raced madly for home, that long over-stride of his carrying him like a bounding antelope. The burly Badger catcher dropped in front of the plate to give Red a taste of his own medicine at blocking. But Red went into the air. He crashed into the receiver, bowled him over, and the ball rolled free while Red slapped his hand to the plate.

The loyal delegation of rooters gave Red a great reception as he trotted to the dugout; and Muriel's gloved hands beat a rapid tattoo as he passed her box.

But this wasn't the Maroons' day. The tragedy of Butch Hampson hung over them far too heavily. Youthful players could not rise to World Series heights. The infield played loosely, and hard-hit balls that would have been knocked down the day before caught the inner defense flat-footed.

The Badgers put over their second run in the fourth. Again Red put the Maroons in the running. He beat out an infield hit, and then went all the way from first to third, on a sacrifice bunt. A moment later, he scored on another short fly; again crashing the catcher.

But Red merely postponed the inevitable. Paley lost a fly along the foul line that either he or the right fielder should have taken to start, last half of the sixth, and the Badger made two bases. Shannon played close to the bag, to hold the runner, and a single shot through his position to score the run. A clean double brought the second man home; and an out and an error brought in the third run of the inning.

The Maroons had several chances to score, but they failed to produce a run. Red walked in the ninth, stole second and third, but died there as the final

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Maroon fanned the breezes. Each team had won a game.

CHAPTER IX.

TRIAL BY TRAIN.

LIKE most ball players, Red detested traveling on trains; but to-night the special train which was to take the Maroons and party out of the Badgers' city could not leave soon enough. All the way to the station, Red expected his taxi to be overtaken by a police car. The group of men standing at the train gate might have been curious fans, but to Red they appeared to be police associates of Detective Harrigan's, ready to serve warrants. No one stopped Red. Then came the long walk to the Pullman. He ascended the stairs into one of the cars, but there was no one wearing the shining badge of the law to block the way; only a smiling, obsequious porter.

Red dropped into one of the empty seats for the berths were not yet made up. A moment later, Ranny Carlton slid in beside him.

"What's the matter, Red? You look worried."

"You don't expect me to be happy, after we blew that game to-day, do you?"

"Oh, it's the game that's bothering you?" There was faint sarcasm in Carlton's voice.

"What else would you expect?"

"Nothing—of course. Want a paper?"

Red had not lingered long enough to purchase one, so he took the one that Carlton handed him. In order not to display too much interest in the latest developments of the Hampson case, Red first scanned the accounts of the game. Then he turned to the item which concerned him even more vitally, just now. He gleaned nothing definite, however. Apparently, the idea of accidental death and even of suicide had been abandoned by the police; if, indeed, they had ever seriously entertained such theories. Detective Harrigan promised startling disclosures soon . . .

The train gave a jerk, and slowly got under way. Red breathed a deep sigh of relief. He could not leave the city quickly enough. If the Maroons could only win the next three games, that would eliminate the necessity of coming back here for any more games . . .

"Greetings, everybody!"

If Red jumped at the sound of that familiar voice, he had nothing on the other members of the team. Even the cool and collected Carlton, beside him, almost fell out of his seat. Yet there was nothing alarming in the somewhat rude joviality of Detective Harrigan, with his inevitable cigar resembling some burnt cabbage stalk and smelling almost as vile. He was about as welcome as one of those pestiferous baseball nuts who make life miserable for any trapped player. But the big, somewhat slovenly dressed ex-flatfoot appeared the antithesis of the sleuth one would expect to be assigned to the most sensational—at least from the point of newspaper space—murder mystery in years.

"Thought I'd take a little joy ride with you boys. Might as well, when some one else is footin' the bill."

Impossible to snub, garrulous and self-asserting, the detective pushed his black iron derby back on his round head and planked himself on the arm of a seat, where a bridge game was in progress. But behind those ingenuously blank eyes there lurked a definite purpose. Pat Harrigan might appear

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to be slow, and his methods cumbersome, but he was always going forward with tortoise-like remorselessness.

THE car rocked, and the wheels beneath it sang their rhythmic song as they clicked over the rails. Loyal rooters came through the car, anxious to strike up conversation with the ball players, but they received little encouragement. Newspaper reporters drifted in, and finding Harrigan, pounced upon him like bees on honey.

But for the press Harrigan had only vague statements. He persisted in trying to give the impression that his coming along was merely a perfunctory gesture, and he smiled knowingly when the reporters openly doubted him.

Red became restive at the proximity of Harrigan and these questing scribes, and so he got up to take a walk. He had no idea how close he was to President Canning's car until he stepped into a vestibule and found himself face to face with Muriel!

They stared at each other. It was their first meeting since Red had hurriedly thrust her handbag into her grasp the night before. Her wide, startled eyes reminded him of the way she had looked then, reminded him, too, of the even more alarming moment when he had opened the bathroom door.

"Oh, Dave," she breathed, "I've wanted so to talk to you. But I have been afraid that some one would discover I had sent for you."

They stood against the swaying wall of the vestibule, their voices raised because of the jarring partitions. Her wide, velvet brown eyes looked appealingly into his.

"Oh, Dave, what must you have thought of me—finding me there at that hour!"

Through Red's throbbing consciousness pounded the realization that she had not been concerned with her own grave danger during those first few moments of Detective Harrigan's investigation; she had been more concerned over what Red thought about her compromising position. And as a matter of fact, that did bother him terribly—even more than he was willing to admit to himself. Why had she been in Butch's room?

"I guess I didn't think anything about that," he told her. "I've been more worried about keeping you out of this—this accident."

"But I can explain how I happened to be there," she protested. "I want you to know, Dave. You have a right to know."

"Please, Muriel — don't tell me! What I don't know, they can't get out of me."

"They?" she repeated, her eyes widening.

"Well, this detective, Harrigan. He isn't so dumb as he looks. And he has a way of gettin' your goat, of catchin' you napping off first. It's a trick delivery. And if I know too much about you, I'm liable to make a slip. I know you've got a perfect explanation for everything—but we've got to keep you out of this jam. There's enough of us in it now."

"Are you in it?" she asked, startled.

"Well, naturally, I've got to answer questions."

Her eyes widened. "Do you think Butch was—murdered?"

He nodded. "It looks like it."

"But who could have done it? I was right there—"

"Please, Muriel! I don't want to know anything about you that night. It's the only way I can trust myself."

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They heard a door open in the car behind them. Red and Muriel moved apart. Red had not realized until then that he had been standing so close to Muriel. The next moment Harrigan came out of the narrow passageway.

"Oh, sorry.—Didn't know there was any one here." He apologized in a bluff manner, and took in Muriel with a frank, appreciative stare. The calm beauty of her delicately featured face failed to dazzle him.

"You're Muriel Canning, aren't cha? Your boy friend, here, can tell you I'm a copper assigned to pick up a few loose ends on last night's affair. Harrigan is the name—Pat Harrigan. Hope I'm not intruding."

"I was leaving, anyway," stated Muriel quickly, and she turned and went into the other car.

Harrigan stared after her a moment, and then turned to Red.

"Nice looker. Come into McHale's drawin' room, will you, Red? I'm rounding up some of the boys to ask them a few questions." He sounded as innocent as if offering an invitation to a poker game. He departed, and a moment later Red followed him.

WHEN the catcher entered McHale's compact drawing room he found in addition to Harrigan, whose big form was deposited very much at ease in the single chair, a nervous Mike McHale and a stubborn Bert Steck. Just as Red sat down, Squeak Tierney entered; and with a frightened glance, tried to make himself inconspicuous in a corner of the berth. But he didn't escape Harrigan.

"Tierney, in my opinion Butch Hampson was murdered. What do you know about the case?"

"Nothing!" cried Squeak with a note of hysteria, his eyes wide with fright. "I tell you I don't know a thing."

"What time were you in Room 319 last night?"

Red saw the trainer all but collapse, and McHale showed wide-mouthed astonishment.

"Who said I was in there?" Squeak managed to gasp.

"Your finger prints, for one thing. Then I've got other information."

Harrigan looked fixedly at Squeak, but his eyes betrayed no hint of what he might be thinking. Red realized that it was this baffling innocence of face that made Harrigan so dangerous a questioner. You never knew how to play him.

"You know, Tierney," the detective resumed, "a police organization is a big proposition. It keeps a lot of records. You can find out a lot of information on a guy in quick time."

Squeak seemed to shrivel up on the berth.

"You'd better come clean," Harrigan went on.

"I—I don't know a thing," cried Squeak.

"What time were you in the room?"

"It was early. Eight o'clock. Plenty of people saw Butch after that."

"You bought that bicarbonate of soda for him?"

"I didn't touch it!—I bought it already wrapped, an' gave it to the hotel clerk that way."

"Why to the clerk?"

"Butch wasn't in his room. He'd come to the desk for his key. I tell you, I never took it out of the wrapper!"

"Yeah, I heard you the first time.—What did you go to see Hampson about?"

"Nothing."

"It must have been something."

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Squeak didn't answer. "Money, wasn't it?"

"Please!" interjected McHale. "You've got to have some consideration for the morale of my team. A World Series is the most important sporting event in the country."

"Sure. I realize that, Mr. McHale; and I'm goin' as easy as I can. But I could crowd the games off the front pages if I wanted to be sensational. You want to remember that it's a dangerous thing even for a baseball manager to cover up a murder."

Harrigan's tone and manner failed to convey any particular meaning, yet Red saw McHale go as white as a new baseball.

"Who says I'm doing that?" the manager barked.

Harrigan shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe it's a natural thing for a manager to do, but it would be a mistake."

Mike McHale wet his lips. "If Butch Hampson was murdered, I'd be the most anxious man in the world to find his murderer!"

JUST then the door opened and Carlton entered. On his clean-shaven, dark features sat a surprised glance of wonder that he should have been called. In street clothes, slim and neatly dressed, he appeared more like one of the newspaper scribes than a ball player.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Oh, yeah," grunted Harrigan. "I want you to check me on a few things. You're Kenyon's roommate. I got a story that you and Kenyon pulled Steck out of Room 319—"

"You don't have to ask him," interrupted Steck in a gruff tone. "I was in 319, and I probably would have knocked Hampson's brains out, if they hadn't stopped me. But I wouldn't poison a man! I don't know anything about poisons, in the first place."

"You'd better not tell too much that might be used against you," warned Harrigan. "Right now, there's enough on you to satisfy any grand jury." He turned back to Carlton. "I guess I don't need your testimony on that point now.—By the way," he called as Carlton started to go, "you know Slip Fegler, don't yuh?"

Carlton turned and hesitated. "Why?"

"I wish you'd tell him I'd like to see him here. He's up forward a few cars. Kind of tall an' slim, with a pasty face—"

"I know him," stated Carlton. "I'll tell him."

Harrigan turned back to Steck, and tried to get from the big pitcher the reason for his sudden animosity toward Butch Hampson the day before; but neither cajoling nor threats could shake a statement from the stubborn, square-jawed veteran.

Harrigan was still persisting when the door opened and Slip Fegler entered, well groomed and insolently at ease.

"Here I am." He lit a cigarette and sat down on the long seat next to McHale.

"What were your associations with Butch Hampson?" demanded Harrigan.

"And who says I had any?" he countered, easily.

"I say so. You know, we arrested Syrian Joe a coupla weeks ago. Bein' a bookie, among other things, he left a lot of records. Several of the names I can use right in this case. Some of the dope, if turned over to the income tax people, will give you a chance to do a little alibiing."

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"Yeah? Is that all?"

"No. One of the interesting events in Room 319 last night was a telephone call put through by you. What was the nature of that conversation?"

"I've got a very bad memory, Mister Officer," tantalized the gambler.

Red started. He suddenly recalled Butch's end of the telephone conversation which he had heard. Was that the telephone call Harrigan referred to?—Should he tell Harrigan? Why not? If the murder of Butch Hampson could be pinned on this rat Fegler, he ought to let no false sense of loyalty to Butch stand in the way.

"I heard that conversation," Red exclaimed. "At least, I heard Hampson's end of it. His bathroom door was open at the time. He said he would not go down and talk to whoever was calling him. He also said he'd changed his mind and that he wouldn't go through with some proposition or other. He dared the party on the other end of the line to do anything about it, then said that if any attempt was made to frame him, he'd tell plenty. He also said he had won the game that day, and would do his best to win the rest of them.—I heard him laugh at what sounded like a threat to put him on the spot."

AS Red repeated this conversation he looked at Slip Fegler. Murder flamed in those feverish, snakelike eyes. Lips pulled away from bared teeth in a tigerish smile.

"Well, take me for a Swede!" exclaimed Harrigan. "The wisecracker has been holdin' out on me. The sooner you guys learn to come clean, the better it will be for all concerned."

"You ain't got a thing on me!" snarled Slip. "This guy suddenly remembers something you two probably cooked up. How far do you think that would go in court, with my mouthpieces working on it?" He turned on Red with impassioned hate. "He knows plenty, all right. Plenty that he won't tell. He's tryin' to give you a bum steer, just to keep himself from burnin'—"

"Why, you dirty rat!" exploded Red, and he leaped across the narrow confines of the drawing room and had the satisfaction of getting home one punch before Steck and the others pulled them apart, just as he and Carlton had pulled Steck away from Hampson the night before.

"All right, Slip," declared Harrigan. "Guess you can beat it. I like to keep things peaceful.—And if you don't mind, I'd like all of you to step outside, with the exception of Kenyon. I want to talk to him alone."

With the exception of Red and the detective, all left the drawing room, McHale included. Harrigan stared at Red, and the latter glared back defiantly.

"I'm not much of a baseball fan," stated Harrigan, "but the boys back at headquarters tell me you're a tough guy with the umpires. I guess a cop's the same thing to you as an umpire. Which means you don't think a hell of a lot of me.—Okay,—seein' as how in my game I don't lose much sleep over people not likin' me. But you and me are goin' to have a showdown—an' it won't bother me none if I have to clap you in jail, for one thing or another."

"For what?" demanded Red.

"Well, material witness, accessory before or after, concealin' evidence—I can think of plenty of things. In other words, you know too much about this case that you're keepin' to yourself not to have a pretty good idea who killed Butch Hampson. And if you

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haven't figured it out, then you know too much to please the baby who gave Hampson the works. So you see, I'd like to have you come clean before anything happens to you."

Red made no comment, but gave the detective look for look.

"One of the most annoying things," continued Harrigan, "is to have your star witness bumped off before you get the facts out of him."

"You can't bluff me, Harrigan!"

"Bluff, huh?—Listen. The house detective found a lady's handbag in the bathroom of Room 319. It vanished when some one doused the lights and conked him. Now, I can just about eliminate every one else and bring that some one down to you. Don't know how you planted it or got rid of it, but maybe that ain't so important. Now, you took that bag because you knew it belonged to Muriel Canning."

By an exercise of control, Red revealed nothing.

"Maybe I can't prove that—yet," Harrigan went on. "But I guess you are not keen about me probin' that aspect of it any further."

"You're not going to get anything out of me, Harrigan," Red gritted.

"All right, suit yourself. You ain't givin' me any reason to feel like a brother lodge member towards you. You could make things a lot simpler for me. Maybe you heard me tell Steck I had enough dope on him to get an indictment from any grand jury. The same thing applies to several others. But, baby, with what I have dug up on you I could have you burned a dozen times.—And I've only just started."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

A Monster Beehive

NEAR the summit of Alleghaney Front Mountain, in Mineral County, West Virginia, and overlooking the city of Keyser, a gray-walled cliff of sandstone juts out from the mountainside with a sheer drop of ninety feet to the jumbled mass of bowlders at its base. High up along the face of this cliff is a narrow cleft in the rock which leads to a comparatively large chamber within the cliff; evidently formed by some upheaval of the strata. This chamber has been used as a storehouse for honey by wild bees for more years than the oldest inhabitant of the vicinity can recall.

Enthusiastic bee hunters have made numerous attempts to obtain the honey, but all efforts have failed, as it would be necessary to blast the rock to enlarge the opening sufficiently for a man to enter. From the narrow opening, tier on tier of honeycomb can be seen as far as the beam of a powerful flashlight can penetrate the darkness. In summer months, when the bees are working, it is next to impossible, even when protected by bee-veils, to approach the entrance as veritable clouds of angry bees swarm onto the intruder, determined to protect their stronghold.

Old-timers state that in past years, when the lordly black bear roamed the Alleghanies in numbers, this spot was a favorite loafing place for Bruin, perhaps with the idea that some day the cliff would fall down and supply his Bearship with the sweets that his sensitive nostrils told him were near.

O. R. Roderick.

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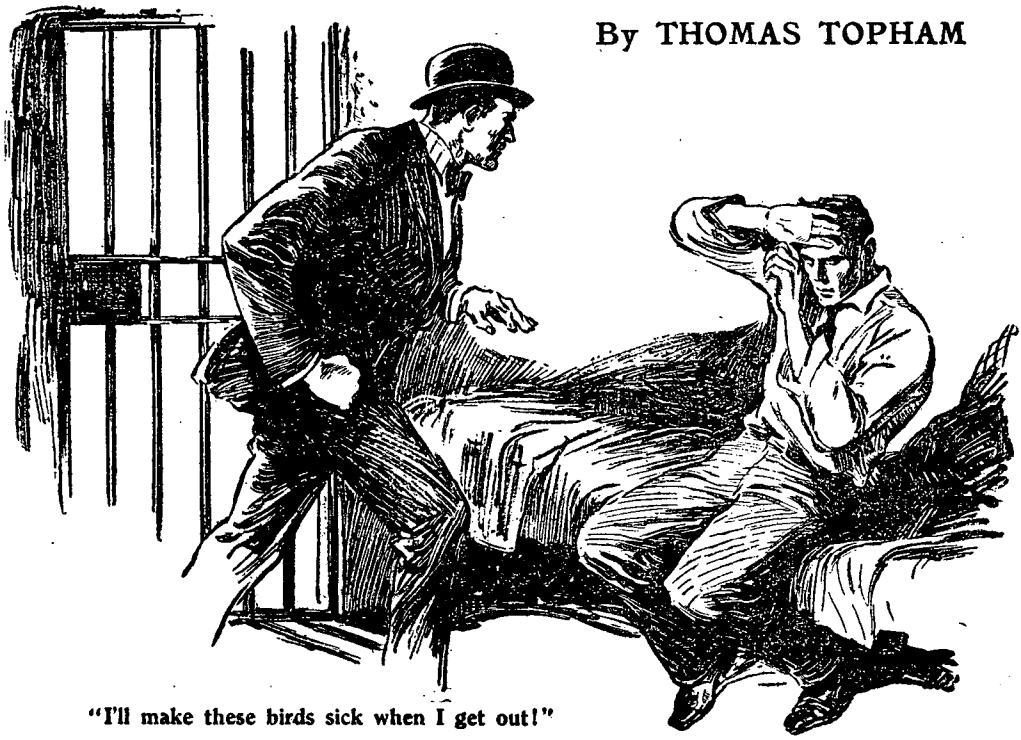
The Piker

By THOMAS TOPHAM



"I'll make these birds sick when I get out!"

Tony Lugano was king of racketeers—but those small-town officials didn't believe in royalty

ANTONIO LUGANO slid along in his speedy roadster like a swallow skimming through the sky. It had been a successful trip. Alone, he had slipped away from his mob, had made this trip to the north, and there, alone, had made connections in liquor running that would widely extend his influence, would assure his continuance in power as a baron in racketeering.

The boys would be surprised when he told them of the deal he had put through to handle all of the northern flow of liquor.

And now he could snap his fingers at Bull Morgan, his nearest rival for control of the underworld. It would block Bull's aspirations to leadership.

It had been a daring move to make that trip alone, without a bodyguard; daring, but at the same time a master stroke. Cautious by nature, Tony, as he was widely known, had thought it out carefully, and then had moved swiftly. It was this combination of daring and cautiousness that had put him in power.

As he sped along he thought of the police with contempt. Law! John Law!

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What a laugh. He had been in the racket for ten years, at the head of his local ring for five now, and never had there been a whisper that he was in danger of the law. Other big shots might go to jail, even to the penitentiary, but not he.

Five years of power as the head of a rapidly extending but illegitimate business, and never a "rap" against him. He wasn't always fighting in the courts for his freedom. He was too smart for that. Quietly but surely he had built up his power, had plugged the holes that might cause trouble, had ruthlessly but carefully swept away competition. And now this deal that would place him supreme in the underworld. They would all pay tribute to him: gambling, vice, night clubs, speakeasies.

The mountains drew closer. The car took the Mintern Grade in high gear, smoothly rounding the curves under Antonio Lugano's expert hand. He reached the summit, began the long drop on the other side. Three hours more and he would be at his luxurious apartment, where he could take a long drink of real imported liquor, his own stock.

A disturbing sound began behind him, but Tony did not connect it with himself and plunged on downward. He was coasting, taking the curves of the paved mountain road at a good forty miles an hour, but there was no danger. The "pop-pop" sound behind him increased, and a motorcycle officer rounded a curve, drew up alongside, waved him to stop.

Tony was puzzled, but he slowed down and came to a stop. The officer leaped off his machine.

"Takin' 'em at forty, eh?" The officer spoke peevishly, as if traveling at forty miles an hour was criminal. "Can't you read?"

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Tony, smiling. He would soon settle this officer. Just a little diplomacy, the signing of a ticket.

"Fifteen miles an hour speed limit on curves," quoted the officer. "Leastways, that's what the signs would have told you if you hadn't been goin' too fast to read 'em. We don't bother 'em at twenty, but forty—that's out."

Tony smiled again.

"Oh, well," he said pleasantly, "I guess everybody gets caught sometime. Where's my tag? I'll send up the fine."

"Tag? Fine?" repeated the officer sarcastically. "Birds don't get tagged an' fined for makin' this here grade a speedway. They go down an' give bond —an' some of 'em go to jail."

Tony thought rapidly. Would the officer be amenable to reason, accept a few dollars and let him go? No, he might get in a jam trying that. His trucks didn't come by this route, or he could have been reasonably sure that the officer was in his pay.

"Lissen," said Tony. "You know the sheriff. I've got a courtesy card from him."

Tony made a move to start for his wallet, but the officer's next words stopped him.

"It won't do you no good," said the officer wearily. "You can show it if you want to, but you're going down to the judge. I've got my orders."

Tony stepped on his starter.

"O. K. by me," he said. "Lead the way."

The officer led the way, looking back occasionally to see that Tony's car was following. Tony was slightly annoyed. He would have to put up bail, but that was easy. Still, he hadn't any too much money with him, after the party he had given up north to seal the big deal. He had had a roll of five grand when he

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started forth, but this had dwindled to less than a thousand. Still, he had thought it enough to get back on.

"NAME?" asked the justice of the peace in the little town of Mintern, at the foot of the grade.

Tony remembered. He was traveling as Jacob K. Mills, had his courtesy card made out that way, other papers to identify him.

"Jacob K. Mills."

"Traveling at forty on the curves," said the justice grimly. "Guilty or not guilty?"

Tony thought of what the officer had said about jail. If he pleaded guilty, the justice might have the audacity to slap him in jail. They got that way at intervals, gave jail sentences instead of fines.

"Not guilty," said Tony.

"Very well," said the justice. "I presume you'll want a lawyer. This is Saturday. We'll set your hearing for Monday, two o'clock. Bail is fixed at a hundred dollars."

Easy, thought Tony. He would give cash bail, forget the whole thing. What was a C note, anyway? That was what money was for. He reached into his left hip pocket; his hand came away empty. Funny, but he must have put his wallet in his right hip pocket. He felt there. No wallet.

Still Tony wasn't alarmed. He began a methodical search of his pockets. Very distinctly he remembered that he had had the wallet when he had paid for his luncheon at a roadhouse. It must have dropped in the car. He turned to the officer who had arrested him.

"I must have dropped my leather—my wallet in the car," he said. "I'll go out and look."

The officer smiled sourly.

"I'll take you out," he said.

A search of the car revealed no wallet, but it did bring to light an automatic pistol in a pocket.

"I got a permit," said Tony hastily, "but the damn' thing was in my wallet."

"Well, we'll just keep it till we investigate you," said the officer. "If you've got a permit, you'll get it back, after we check up."

Tony wasn't bothered about that.

"One grand minus," he said lightly, referring to the wallet.

The officer looked at him keenly. Tony remembered suddenly that he shouldn't have used the word "grand" in his pose of Jacob K. Mills, successful real estate man. He stalked back to the court room with the officer following suspiciously at his heels.

He had accounts in five banks under different names. It would be queer if he couldn't get hold of a lousy hundred dollars. The best thing to do, he decided, was to act nonchalant.

"Judge," he said, "can I give you a check? It looks like I've lost my wal—"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the judge mirthlessly. "No checks in this court. I've got quite a collection of checks, and some of the men who passed 'em proved they were better than millionaires."

The gang leader looked rather helplessly around the small, bleak court room. He fished in his trousers' pocket, cursed the generous gestures he had made in tossing over bills and saying "keep the change." He had a nickel and a thin dime. But he brightened. If he could get word to Pickles Darby, his chief lieutenant, all would be well. Pickles would get the money down to him if he had to fly in an airplane. He could telegraph.

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"Will you send a telegram for me to a—a friend?" asked Tony.

"Where's your money? Somebody will have to drive eight miles," said the justice.

"I'll drop it off at San Justin," said the officer. "I'm going that way."

Tony's anger flared.

"You mean you won't stake me to a lousy half dollar?" he roared. "I'll put up my watch—" He stopped in confusion, cursed. He had given his wrist watch to that dame he had met at the party when she had begged prettily for a "souvenir." "What is this, a frame?"

The justice glared at Tony.

"Bill," he said softly to the motorcycle officer, "take this man over and let him cool off in jail for a while."

Tony's pose of a man of business fell away.

"You ain't goin' to stick me in the can for a lousy traffic tag, are you?" he demanded. "Why, I've signed 'em—everywhere."

"I'm going to do just that," said the justice grimly. "I'm teaching these motorists along this highway a lesson, and you happen to be one of the worst of the breed. Don't worry. You'll have company to-morrow when the Sunday traffic starts. However, I don't want to be too hard. I'll reduce your bail to fifty dollars. You should be able to raise that."

"Oh yeah?" derided Tony, and with that he was ignominiously dragged off to jail.

The door of the cell clanged harshly, gratingly.

THE pampered gangster flung himself down on one of the bunks with a loud and vicious thump. Having raised no commotion by his unnecessary violence, Tony grunted indignantly, sat up, put his chin in his hands and glared at the floor.

Having regarded the floor for a considerable time, he raised his eyes to the steel bars that encompassed him securely. They appeared to be good, stout, steel bars, that gave no signs of fading away. Then he turned his glare on another man who sat on the bunk across the cell from him. His companion was more vulnerable than the bars. He stood the glare for a brief time only, then his shifty eyes gave way.

"Can it," ordered Tony's companion, in a husky voice. "Hard luck, bo, but I didn't git you in this here hoosegow. What're you jugged fer anyway?"

Tony did not deign to reply. He was too furiously angry to talk. He continued his insolent stare at his embarrassed and unoffending companion for another half minute, then he arose and began turning out his pockets. They had little in them that the jailer had left. As he brought each article to light he threw it down on the bunk. He finished his search.

"Damn it," said Tony heartily.

He took the three steps necessary to reach the door and shook the grating. "Hey!" he called. The lone jailer finally answered his hail.

"Whatcher want?"

"I want some cigars and cigarettes," ordered Tony. "This is the limit."

"Yeah, so it is," agreed the jailer derisively. "An' I suppose you'd like to have a drink of Bourbon an' a couple show tickets an' some quail on toast." The jailer laughed gratingly. He was sorry that some one else was not present to appreciate his humor. Then he shuffled off while Tony hurled imprecations after him.

Tony went back and sat down on his

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bunk. His companion in misery eyed him shiftily.

"I've got the makin's," Tony's fellow jail-bird offered.

"Makings what?" growled Tony.

"Pill."

Tony glared across the cell. The other prisoner held out a frayed tobacco sack and a package of cigarette papers.

"Can't roll 'em," groaned Tony, for the first time in his life realizing what an accomplishment it would be. His companion snorted contemptuously, but he selected a paper and rolled a neat cigarette. "Lick here," he indicated, as he held it up to Tony's face. Tony licked, looking cross-eyed at the cigarette so as to hit the right spot.

He accepted the completed "pill" without thanks and lighted it with one of his two remaining matches. He drew a lungful of smoke, found that it satisfied, though not of the choicest tobacco, and threw himself back on his bunk. Life was a trifle more bearable.

Tony's cellmate regarded the gangster with his small, beady eyes glittering, and a frown on his narrow brow. If Tony could have read the mind of the youth he would have discovered to his surprise that Slim McGowan was perhaps the more disturbed of the two. Having a second prisoner in the cell seriously discommoded Slim and bade fair to upset some rather carefully laid plans. But to Tony, Slim was nothing but a "punk" and not worth treating even courteously.

Slim was in jail for the trifling matter of having mistaken another person's automobile for his own. He, too, had been caught on the Mintern Grade, and was awaiting the arrival of an officer to take him back to the city.

However, Slim had had no intention of waiting long—until Tony had come protestingly upon the scene. A flimsy prison like the Mintern jail couldn't hold Slim. Already he had sawed through two cell bars and had masked the places with chewing gum darkened with blacking wiped from his shoes. He had intended slipping out of the cell that very Saturday night, and while the night jailer slept peacefully, sawing the window bars, and so make his way back again to the world of free men.

HAVING attempted to establish friendly relations with Tony by rolling him a cigarette, Slim pursued his advantage.

"What're you in fer?" he asked, when Tony had relieved his overburdened nerves by several inhalations.

Tony jerked his head around and surveyed his companion.

"What's it to you?" he snarled. Then he thought better of it. He might want another cigarette. "Speedin'. Damnedest thing I ever heard of, holdin' up a guy for bail. I didn't know they could do it."

"They kin here; anyway they do," said Slim. "What's your racket?"

This was disturbing. Tony surveyed Slim again, wondered if the little punk had recognized him.

"Real estate," he answered briefly.

Slim chuckled.

"On the level?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah, on the level." Tony sat up in his bunk, glared at Slim.

"Well, you don't look it," said Slim impudently. "You look like one of them high class booze runners. I knowed one wunst—"

Slim stopped as Tony got to his feet, a deadly gleam in his eye.

"I'm in the real estate business, get me?" he snarled. "None of your wise cracks. Don't go hookin' me up with gangsters an' booze runners. I'll make

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these birds here sick when I get out, and I will you, too, if you go doin' any broadcastin' that gets me in a jam."

Slim shrank back on his bunk at this outburst. Tony sat down again. It came over him what he had intended doing that night. He had planned to throw a party to celebrate the extension of his power. There would have been girls there, Winnie and Ethel—and Mabel. And fine liquor. Good Lord, how he wanted a drink. Involuntarily he groaned.

"How're you gonna git out?" asked Slim timidly.

Tony wanted to groan again. How was he going to get out? It was one thing to talk of getting out, another to do it.

"If it's speedin' on the Mintern Grade," went on the unfeeling Slim, perceiving that he had struck a vulnerable spot, "money won't git you out—ever. Like as not you'll git sixty days. This jail's seen some pretty big shots locked up—yessir, locked up, till now it's a mighty big damn' fool who speeds round here. Yeah, like as not you're in for a jolt, with no chance of payin' a fine."

"Sixty days?" said the horrified gang leader, caught off his guard. "Sixty days? He can't do it."

Such a thing as that might wreck all his plans, Tony reflected with growing alarm. He had heard of judges in hick places who sent people to jail for traffic violations. He'd have to get in touch with Pickles Darby after all and have a lawyer sent down. But that would result in publicity. "Antonio Lugano Jailed!" There would be a sting to that. It would make him look ridiculous to his friends.

"Oh, you might git out if you was makin' only, say, twenty-five," said Slim, watching Tony craftily. "If it's thirty, he'll say thirty days; an' forty, sixty days; an' if it's fifty, Lord help you. He'll keep you in jail all summer. He's a stingaree, that judge. They jest took three birds outa here for the county jail that got sixty apiece, an' say, they was some sick lookin' crowd. One of 'em was ravin' an' offered to pay a fine of a thousand bucks."

THE effect of Slim's words was worse than he had expected. The gangster looked wildly around. "Sixty days," he repeated, and cursed horribly.

"No use to pull a wing ding," said Slim in a low voice. "I could git you outa here in five minutes."

Tony looked back over his shoulder.

"What's that?" he snarled.

"I could git you out if it was night," said Slim cautiously.

Tony looked hard at Slim. A trap? His innate cautiousness told him to go slow. And yet, if he could get out, it would mean much to him. His future was at stake, his carefully planned, cautiously built up racket, that might flop to pieces if he were away. Pickles Darby couldn't run it long without having everything tangled.

"Look here," he said, taking the few steps to Slim's bunk, and his manner suddenly changed from ferocity to honeyed suavity, "are you talkin' sense or only soundin' off? If you mean what you say I can make it worth your while. I'll give you a gr—a thousand dollars if you produce the goods."

"Le's see the money," suggested Slim, "or your stake sheet," which meant his receipt from the jailer.

Tony coughed.

"After I get out, of course," he said. "I lost my wallet up the road. That's why I'm here. Couldn't put up fall money—couldn't give bail. But hell,

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kid, I can get it for you in two minutes after we hit the street."

But his explanation sounded lame even in his own ears. He wondered how it sounded to Slim. Never in any big liquor deal or negotiations with rivals had he hung on the words as he did upon the next to be spoken.

"I thought they was some ketch to it." Slim suddenly seemed to lose interest in Tony. "Allers is some ketch," Slim continued. "You're jest like all them high class birds—full of promises."

Slim rolled himself a cigarette and flopped back on his bunk, where he listened without apparent interest while Tony cajoled, promised and threatened.

The jailer brought their supper of beans, stale bread, a piece of salt pork and coffee. Slim ate his greedily. Tony gagged, but got down the dishwatery coffee and a piece of bread.

DAYLIGHT began to fail. Slim accommodatingly rolled cigarettes for both. Tony dozed, finally slept, though restlessly. Slim lay on his own bunk, but he did not sleep. It grew toward midnight. The night jailer took a look around, settled himself in a propped back chair for a nap.

Tony turned restlessly on his uncomfortable bunk. He awoke and cursed the jailer for his loud snoring, raised himself on an elbow and peered around in the dim light that filtered from a lantern in the corridor. And then he detected a shadowy form crouching in the corner of the cell.

"Hey," said Tony.

The shadowy form uprose and came softly to his bunk.

"Shut up," hissed Slim. "Come on if you wanta git out. I thought you was sound asleep. Bring your shoes."

Tony arose softly and went to the corner. The two cell bars that Slim had sawed had been wrenched apart. Slim slipped through the opening and Tony followed. Slim padded noiselessly over to the window with Tony behind him. The window bars were light. Slim sawed them to the accompaniment of the jailer's snores, timing each stroke exactly. The window bars gave way.

With a boost Tony went through the window and Slim followed. The gangster breathed the air of freedom and chuckled at the thought of the bereaved authorities who had locked him up. But Slim had no time to allow Tony to indulge in pleasant thoughts. Getting out of jail was serious business with him. He was thoroughly bent on getting away and his single track mind was working on that line only. He clutched Tony's arm.

"Come along," he urged. "Put on your shoes. We've got to beat it out of here pronto. If I kin find a loose auto we'll soon be on our way."

"Mine's around on the other side of the jail," said Tony. "I saw 'em park it there, the big bums, but they took away my ignition key."

"If they haven't locked the transmission," growled Slim, "it's the dope."

Tony chuckled again. Luck seemed to be with him.

"They couldn't lock it," he whispered. "Parkin' place guy broke it a couple days ago an' I haven't had it fixed."

Slim led the way around the jail. He cautiously worked with the car and to Tony's surprise it started.

"Hop in," whispered Slim, and in another moment, seated beside Slim, he was dashing away from the jail.

"Jumped the ignition," explained

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Slim, "so you better pray we don't git stalled. If we stop, sometimes it's hard to git goin'."

Slim skirted the town and drove rapidly back to the highway. He turned toward the city, but a few minues later left the main road.

"Takin' a roundabout way," he explained to Tony. "No use to give 'em a break by battin' down the main stem. If the noise of us gittin' out with this heap didn't wake that jailer, why he makes a round ag'in at three o'clock, an' he'll find us gone then. He'll send out an alarm all up an' down the road."

Tony laughed. It was good to be free and such a short distance from safety.

"Kid, I'm gonna put you in big," he promised. "I meant that about the grand—I mean that thousand bucks. I'll make it two, an' you get a good job."

"We gotta git out of this first," said the practical Slim. "Jail breakin' is a felony. Put you in the big house five, ten years, so don't let 'em ketch you. Me, they already want me fer things worse than jail breakin'. This jaloppy runs pretty good. I'll drive because I know this country pretty well. Don't be scared, but it wouldn't be so hot, a real estater goin' up to the big house fer jail breakin'."

TONY'S light mood passed. He hadn't thought of there being a penalty for jail breaking. When he had followed Slim it had never occurred to him that he was committing a crime for which they could put him in the penitentiary, but here he was, out on the highway, likely to be caught by a prowling motor cycle officer. Not that he cared about the crime. But at the best he had been liable to sixty days in jail. Now, well, he wished he had Pickles and his trusty automatic, or better still, his organized band of droppers. They could sweep him into the city, reckless of officers.

"Kid," said Tony, "maybe we'd better lay up a while. This road's liable to be hot, too."

"You mean hide?"

"Yeah."

"I been thinkin' that myself," said Slim. "Yeah, it must be gittin' along towards mornin', an' by this time they oughta found out we're gone."

It was getting daylight when Slim spotted a side road. He turned off, reached a dry river bed and carefully hid the car in the willows. Very efficient, was Slim. He led the way a mile further down the stream, where he selected a secluded spot among the bushes and bade Tony take a nap.

"They'll watch the highway all day fer that heap of yours," Slim explained. "To-morrer it'll be safer. Better sleep."

They dozed, awoke, discussed getting something to eat, but Slim was afraid to go out in daylight. In the afternoon Tony went soundly to sleep. He awoke at dusk to find Slim stirring around. Slim rolled cigarettes with almost the last of his tobacco.

"Holy gee, but I'm hungry," growled Slim. "We've gotta git some chow. Say, I waked up a while ago when I hear some guys talkin'. It was some cops lookin' fer us, all right, an' they come pretty close. I was gittin' ready to wake you up when they went on by."

Tony shivered at the narrow escape. What a figure he would cut in court as a jail breaker. When it got dark Slim led the way back up the river bed to the hidden car. They drove along the road slowly, Slim peering into the darkness. Then again he ran the car into some

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bushes, concealing it as thoroughly as he could.

"Where you goin' now?" asked Tony nervously.

"Get something to eat," explained Slim. "Hoof it for a while."

At a farmhouse Slim climbed through a wire fence and told his companion to follow. He slipped like a shadow through the field. Tony stumbled along clumsily. Slim reached the shadow of buildings, peered among them, then disappeared in a shed. He came out with two objects which he handed Tony. They felt slightly wet and sticky, but Tony took them. He discovered they were chickens, dead, their necks neatly wrung by the deft Slim. "I'll git another while the gittin's good," whispered Slim, and slid away.

"Hands up!" came a gruff command, and Tony was dazed as a light flashed in his eyes. He could see a shotgun pointing directly at his breast.

"Got you at last," said the voice, triumphantly. "Caught with the goods."

Tony failed to put up his hands. For one thing, his hands were full of chicken and he was bewildered. He looked around for Slim, but his protector was gone.

"Why—why—" he stammered.

"March up to the house," ordered the voice, "or I'll fill your hide full of number ten shot."

The gangster, still holding the chickens, marched.

Lights went on in the house. The farmer's wife and daughter came out to inspect the catch. Tony made an attempt at his real estate story.

"Real estater, heh?" cackled the farmer. "A unshaved, seedy lookin' real estater, stealin' chickens. Well, you'll pay for them chickens then. How's that for a bargain? Ten dollars an' cheap at the price, an' you go free, an' a lucky man you're not all shot to pieces."

"I haven't any money with me," snarled Tony.

"Can't you give a check?" jeered the farmer. "I dote on checks. Minnie, bring me a rope outa that closet."

Minnie obeyed. Tony's feet and hands were tied securely, and he was seated on the porch steps under guard of the women, while the farmer went for his automobile. The man drove up to the steps, and with some difficulty, assisted by his wife and daughter, got the helpless gangster on the floor in the back.

"I'll put 'im in the San Justin jail," he told his wife. "Throw them chickens in as evidence. Be back in an hour or so."

HE started off. The road was dark, the way was rough. Tony, his hands tied behind him, his feet bound, suffered from the bumps, rolling from side to side. He groaned and cursed. His face was skinned, his shins were barked. The farmer drove grimly on.

The night jailer received Tony with pleasure.

"He's one of them guys broke jail at Mintern," he said. "Too bad you didn't get his pardner. Tough babies. We been on the lookout because they was seen around here."

Tony was relieved to get untied and in a cell. He wondered where Slim was. Slim, he remembered, had spoken something of leaving the car and "hoofing it across country." Probably that was what he was doing now. He would have given much to be with the capable and resourceful Slim.

They took the gangster before a justice at San Justin the next day. He was

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charged with breaking jail at Mintern and "theft of poultry."

"What was that last?" asked Tony.

"Theft of poultry — chicken stealing."

"Good Lord," groaned Tony.

"How do you plead? Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," roared Tony.

The justice bound him over to the superior court. Quickly he was bundled into an automobile and transported to the county jail, for his jail breaking exploit had made the officers apprehensive.

It was not in his own county, of that Tony was glad. There was little chance of being recognized in the somewhat out of the way county seat.

Bathed, dressed in jail blue denim, Antonio Lugano, gang leader and rum baron, sat on a bunk again. He held his head in his hands, groaned, wished he had Slim to advise him. He couldn't make up his mind to call on Pickles Darby, even if he could reach him. If it wasn't for that charge of chicken stealing, he would try to send out a call for help, hire a lawyer, give bail and forfeit it, or fight to the last ditch.

Pickles could "blow down the beef" on that chicken stealing case, could pay the farmer a hundred times the cost of the chickens and he would drop the charge. And he might succeed in fixing the jail breaking charge, or wearing it out. But he couldn't face the covert sneers of his friends, possibly the publicity, of the chicken stealing charge. What a break that would be for the newspapers.

But the next day Tony had a cunning thought. District attorneys could be dealt with. They were not always stern and forbidding. He might bargain, "cop a plea" as many another man he knew had done, get off with a light sentence in exchange for his plea of guilty. It was worth trying.

And he thought now that he might weather a month, possibly a little longer, in jail. After it was arranged, he would get word to Pickles Darby in some way that he was "out of the city," intimate that he was lying low for a brief time, direct him how to handle affairs until he returned. He asked if he could see the district attorney. An assistant was sent.

The assistant seemed very willing to listen to him. He laughed over the jail breaking when Tony explained that he had "only climbed out after the other feller."

"Why, yes," said the attorney. "I'll see if the court won't take your plea of guilty on the lightest charge, and we'll hold the other over you. The calendar is pretty crowded. You're wise to do it. Yes, I'll rush it. You can come up to-morrow."

Tony was jubilant, saw his troubles fading. It was true, the chicken charge was the least, but it would all be done quietly. No one would ever know. Thirty, sixty days in jail. Then he would suddenly appear and take things over from Pickles.

The court proceedings were brief. The assistant district attorney was as good as his word. He recommended the minimum sentence for "theft of poultry," considering the defendant's willingness to save the State the cost of a trial. The other charge would be held in abeyance, probably later quashed.

"Are you ready for sentence?" asked the judge.

"Yes sir," said Tony.

"The court will act on the district attorney's recommendation," said the judge. "Inasmuch as the legislature at its last session made theft of poultry a felony, the court orders that you be

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taken to the State prison and there confined for not less than eighteen months and not more than three years—"

Felony! And he had thought he was getting off with a light jail sentence, had never once dreamed that stealing a couple of lousy chickens was a serious offense. He opened his mouth to protest, heard the judge drone on, heard the next case called. In a daze he sat down. The big house for eighteen months to three years! The man who could never be trapped!

PICKLES DARBY looked earnestly at Bull Morgan across the table. Bull had been the only rival whom Antonio Lugano had ever feared. Others were present, some of Tony's men, some brought by Bull Morgan, for the conference.

"First I thought somebody give that bird Tony a ride," said Pickles. "They find his roadster hid out on the road north. Me, first off, I thought you'd done it, an' I was out for blastin' you, an' then, after a couple months I git word in a roundabout way that he's up in the big house. Say, I was surprised. One of the boys from here who had went up recognized him up there—"

"An' me, I thought he was the smartest guy in the racket," said Bull Morgan. "There never was a rap against him, an' honest, I thought he was too smart for 'em ever to git their hands on him."

"Well, he wasn't," said Pickles. "So with him gone, our crowd was kinda gittin' disorganized, an' I thought mebbe you'd like to have us join with you, and everybody be happy. Tony was a good organizer an' he built things up solid. We got a good line comin' down from the north an' with your distribution system, you oughta use us easy."

"You're on," said Bull Morgan. "The two of us can handle the whole thing, an' it'll blow down this talk of gang wars. They ain't good for business. But how the hell do you suppose they got Tony?"

"Say," said Pickles Darby, vast contempt in his voice, "do you know what they got him for?"

Ears were now strained all around the table. The boys wanted to know, too.

"No," said Bull.

"They ketch him up in some hick town stealin' chickens," said Pickles, "an' he pleaded guilty. Stealin' chickens! What a racket. The lousy piker! Now, what do you suppose he wanted with them chickens?"

THE END.

LOWELL THOMAS

The famous biographer and broadcaster resumes his series of short true stories of great adventurers and unusual adventures, during September. Another of the features of ARGOSY'S golden anniversary year!

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MEN of DARING
By Stooki Allen
THE FIGHTING ENGINEER!
HE WAS BORN ON HIS FATHER'S RANCH IN ARIZONA. HIS DAD HAD JUST RETURNED FROM A TRIP ABROAD AND THE COWBOYS, CELEBRATING, RODE OUT TO GIVE HIM A SIX-GUN SALUTE. THE CARRIAGE HORSES RAN AWAY AND SEÑORA de HORA WAS SERIOUSLY HURT.
COL. MANUEL de HORA
BEFORE SHE DIED SHE GAVE BIRTH TO MANUEL de HORA, DESTINED FOR OVER 70 YEARS OF ADVENTURE. HE HAS FACED DEATH 100 TIMES!
AT 14 HE WENT TO SAN FRANCISCO. ON THE WATERFRONT HE ACCEPTED A DRINK FROM A SAILOR. IT WAS DRUGGED. HE AWOKE TO FIND HE HAD BEEN "SHANGHAIED." THE BRUTAL SAILORS STARTED TO PICK ON HIM, BUT AFTER HE KNOCKED ONE OF THEM COLD WITH A BELAYING PIN HE WAS LET ALONE.
IN THE ANTARCTIC OCEAN HIS SHIP RAN AFOUL OF AN ICEBERG AND WAS CRIPPLED. DE HORA AND 2 OTHERS WENT FOR AID IN A SMALL BOAT. AFTER GOING 300 MILES THEY SIGHTED PATAGONIA.
THE SHORE WAS LINED WITH MAN-EATING NATIVES AND THEY COULDN'T LAND. THEY FINALLY SIGHTED A SHIP AND WERE TAKEN ABOARD. "GIVE ME A BOTTLE OF RUM AND A POUND OF TOBACCO AND I'LL MAKE IT BACK," SAID DE HORA, AND HE DID, ALONE! HIS SHIP WAS EVENTUALLY SAVED.

This feature appears in ARGOSY every week

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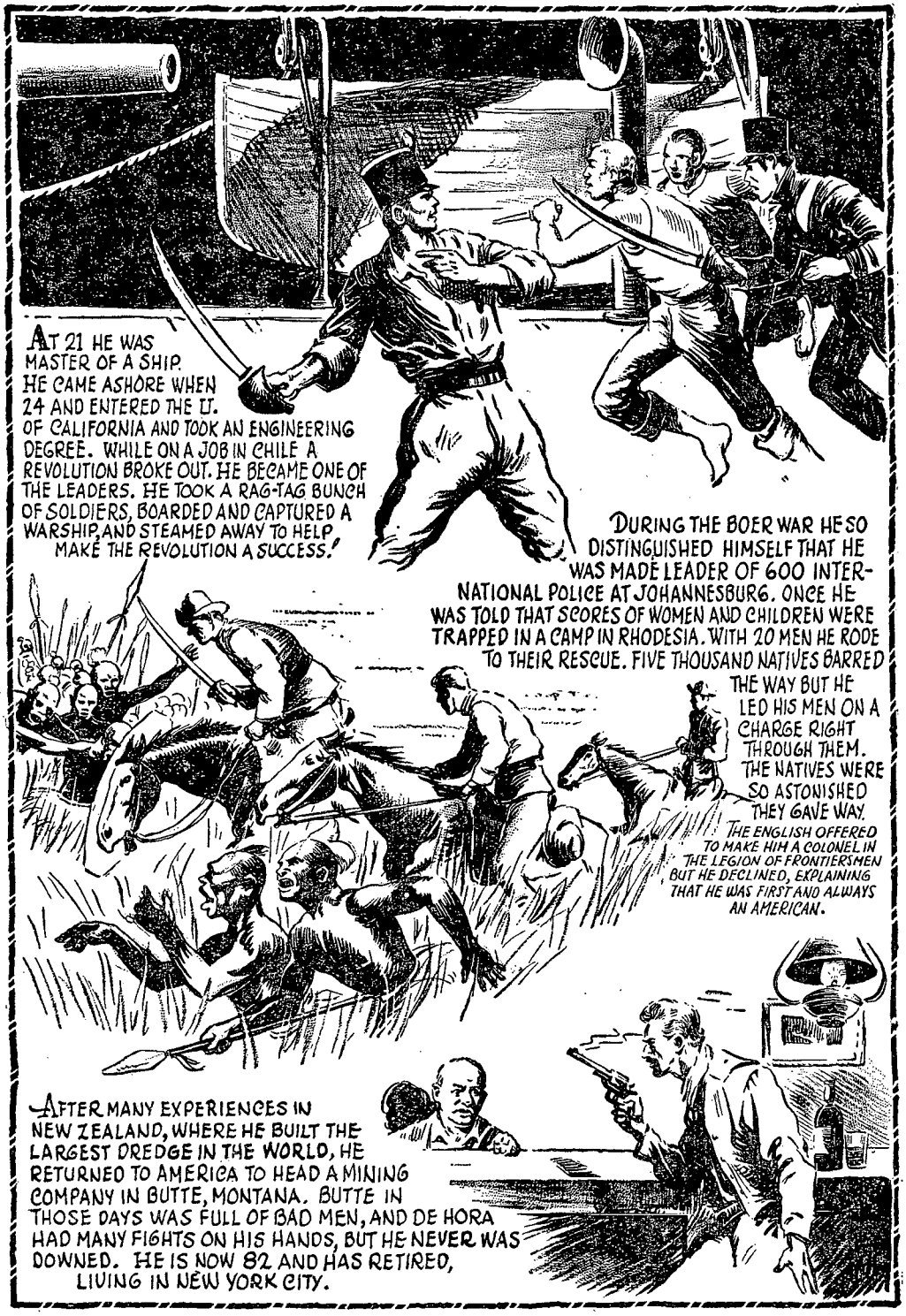
AT 21 HE WAS MASTER OF A SHIP. HE CAME ASHORE WHEN 24 AND ENTERED THE U. OF CALIFORNIA AND TOOK AN ENGINEERING DEGREE. WHILE ON A JOB IN CHILE A REVOLUTION BROKE OUT. HE BECAME ONE OF THE LEADERS. HE TOOK A RAG-TAG BUNCH OF SOLDIERS, BOARDED AND CAPTURED A WARSHIP, AND STEAMED AWAY TO HELP MAKE THE REVOLUTION A SUCCESS!
DURING THE BOER WAR HE SO DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF THAT HE WAS MADE LEADER OF 600 INTERNATIONAL POLICE AT JOHANNESBURG. ONCE HE WAS TOLD THAT SCORES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN WERE TRAPPED IN A CAMP IN RHODESIA. WITH 20 MEN HE RODE TO THEIR RESCUE. FIVE THOUSAND NATIVES BARRED THE WAY BUT HE LED HIS MEN ON A CHARGE RIGHT THROUGH THEM. THE NATIVES WERE SO ASTONISHED THEY GAVE WAY.
THE ENGLISH OFFERED TO MAKE HIM A COLONEL IN THE LEGION OF FRONTIERSMEN BUT HE DECLINED, EXPLAINING THAT HE WAS FIRST AND ALWAYS AN AMERICAN.
AFTER MANY EXPERIENCES IN NEW ZEALAND, WHERE HE BUILT THE LARGEST DREDGE IN THE WORLD, HE RETURNED TO AMERICA TO HEAD A MINING COMPANY IN BUTTE, MONTANA. BUTTE IN THOSE DAYS WAS FULL OF BAD MEN, AND DE HORA HAD MANY FIGHTS ON HIS HANDS, BUT HE NEVER WAS DOWNED. HE IS NOW 82 AND HAS RETIRED, LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY.

Next Week: Frank Buck—He "Brings 'Em Back Alive"

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The Spot of Life

By AUSTIN HALL
Co-author of "The Blind Spot"

Could natural laws explain the disappearance of Hal Watson into the mysterious Blind Spot— or was it the Occult?

Instantly the gorillas charged

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

IN a certain room in a dingy, unoccupied house on Chatterton Place, in San Francisco, exists a strange and sinister menace—the Blind Spot—a void into which several men have disappeared. One man has come out of the Blind Spot. The Bar Senestro he calls himself, a terrifying, though handsome, figure.

It is when Professor Chalmers Watson dies after a visit from the Bar Senestro that the professor's son, Hal Watson, and Detective Sam Flanning take up the trail that leads them to the Blind Spot. They learn first of the disappearance, previously, of Professor Watson's predecessor, Professor Holcomb, the day before he was going to announce to the world important dis-

This story began in the Argosy for August 13.

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coveries concerning the Occult—and especially the Blind Spot.

Going to the house on Chatterton Place, Hal and Flanning discover a queer laboratory. When one of them puts a certain piece of apparatus in motion, a miracle happens before their eyes. A mistlike nebula forms and solidifies. With a crash the machine disintegrates, but the jewel-like substance remains.

Downstairs, they discover, behind a panel, a similar substance. In the midst of their exploration, the Blind Spot, a flashing glare of light, appears and the Bar Senestro steps from it and grapples with Hal. Flanning rushes to his companion's aid, but before he can help, the Bar Senestro and Hal have disappeared in the Spot.

Hal had directed that in case anything happened to him, Jimmy Fuillard, a young attorney, should be notified. Flanning, going next door to telephone, finds that the old lady living there, Selena Whitcomb, is Fuillard's aunt. Later, Fuillard takes the jewel-like substance to a German chemist, Frederick Van Tassel.

Fred cannot tell him its nature without an analysis, but he says it is probably something hitherto unknown. The two men, intent upon solving its mystery, visit a real estate dealer who had had charge of the Chatterton Place house. He tells them that many men have died there.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WARNING.

JIMMY FUILLARD had heard enough; he backed away with his companion. As they were getting into the taxi, he asked the German:

"What do you think about it?"

"W'at can I think until I look at the house? I think right now there's a monkey business. Yet, this fellow tells the truth. I heard him talk before. How did those young fellers die? Answer me dot?"

At the top of the hill they stopped; Jimmy paid the driver; he explained to his companion:

"I want you to walk across the street where you can get the benefit of the whole thing. There now. Notice the sun shining? Out here you feel natural. Now then, we'll cross over."

Again the strange sensation seized them; indefinite to be sure, but not to be mistaken. The German sniffed cautiously, and true to his training walked back and repeated the performance. He noted the distance from the building—about two hundred feet.

When they had gained the steps Jimmy threw open the door and allowed his companion the sensation of silence. Again the German performed a calculation, moving in and out to make sure. Each time there was the full sweep of the city's racket on the outside and silence within the screen.

"All right," he said simply. "Now we go into the house. You say there iss one more stone? I want for see it."

The detective had come forward, was introduced.

"Anything happen?" asked Jimmy.

"All quiet on the Potomac," Flanning replied. "The old Spot is slumbering. But it's still there."

The German nodded; removed one pair of spectacles and put on another. First of all he looked at the statue in the corner. After that, he passed into the other room, stopped with evident admiration while he gazed at the books.

"By golly," he mumbled, "you say dis Rhamda vas-hiss-name have dis library, eh? Vell, he vas no fool. You

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can take dot for a start. Now, vere is dis Spot?"

Detective Flanning opened the door, pointed. Already he could feel the cool assurance of the valiant little German. The fellow held no fear—no superstition.

And yet, there was still the weird isolation that Flanning and Hal had noticed the night before. The squat little chemist stood still, listening. The detective pointed to the center of the room and told how Jimmy Fuillard had walked across.

"Like a fool," came the answer. "No, I don't vant to do dot. For why should I stick my head in the cannon? Better first find out about der law. But it ain't ghosts."

"What is it?"

The other shrugged his shoulders; he turned to Detective Flanning.

"Mebbe the old professor was right in his speech about dot Blind Spot. I read it in the paper. He said it would be the greatest day since Columbus. You bet."

HAD they gone over the city with a fine tooth comb, they could not have picked up a better man than Frederick Van Tassel. Here was a level head—unafraid, emotionless, scientific. Already Flanning was picking up his spirits. The little fellow had turned from the Blind Spot, shut the door.

"Now," he said, "I vant for look at that other stone. Oh, I see. Now get me a chair. Here, you better keep this wrapped-up stone as far away as you can. Now then."

Slowly he boosted himself up, peering at the setting inside the panel, and finally bringing up his hand. For several moments he kept watching, never speaking. Finally he climbed down. Fuillard had expected him to pry out the paneled stone.

"No," the German said, "we disturb nothing. Why should we? This room is full of phenomena. So first we will see them same phenomena. Otherwise mebbe we will be electrocuted."

"Electricity?"

"How do I know? Everything is electric at the bottom. Vibration—ions, protons, nuclei—all just a humble-jumble to keep man guessing. W'at iss electricity? No man knows. He sees it. He uses it. He feels it. But dot iss all."

He kept moving; as soon as he had satisfied himself about the panel stone he started for the stairs; climbing slowly and methodically, counting the steps and taking a mental measurement. Once inside the laboratory he sat down, his short little legs barely touching the floor.

"Where did you find the stone?" he asked at last. "Put it in the exact spot. I mean where you found it last. All right, now, leave it there."

Certainly he was a man of few words; his eyes roved up and down, crossways and back. At last he explained:

"Everything must be left just as it was—dot's the way we want it. Sure, the stones is mystery—but the phenomena are more important. I want to figure them out. Mebbe we'll get some more."

Fuillard and the detective were getting a glimpse of the wonderful difference in human beings; where they had been all excitement and emotion, this man could see nothing but experiment. At last the chemist was satisfied; he started for the stairs. At the bottom he caught Sam Flanning by the shoulder.

"More better you go to bed," he ad-

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vised. "I don't think we'll have anything exciting, for a while yet, anyway. And you need sleep."

There was truth in that. Flanning sought the bed in the spare room and in spite of his wounds was soon wrapped in slumber. Jimmy Fuillard walked to the house next door. The German kept on with his figures, measuring the rooms, one by one, and even the cellar. Finally, he did even more than that—he stepped outside, walked across the street, and found the extreme border of the weirdness, noting his calculation in a memorandum.

WHEN the attorney returned, they met on the steps. The German conducted him to the library. He held up his pencil suggestively.

"Here," he said, "iss w'at I find so far. For instance, first, we have concentric rings of influence—the first approximately two hundred feet from the Blind Spot. Und another a little different, about two hundred feet—I mean the radius, you understand?—und finally from the door, another at about twenty-four feet. And the stones both at variant angles."

"What do you make of it?"

The German held up his hands. "Give me a chance. I hafn't made anything. I'm only trying. But those rings mean a lot. There iss magnetism or something like it, setting up a sphere of vibratory contact. The farther you get inside, the less you feel like a real man. And dot stone"—indicating the one in the library panel—"isn't a stone at all."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But she's the king business of it all. I would call it a sort of key. But listen, Mr. Fuillard. Did they really watch that jewel upstairs grow from nothing?"

"I guess they did. The whole thing sounds impossible, but if one is true, the rest must follow."

The German blinked, looking straight ahead. "If I didn't know better, I would call it all damn monkey-business. *Ya!* But I see dot stone and I have got to believe. It ain't miracle because dot ain't common sense. It's natural; but what kind of natural you call this?"

"Search me," said the attorney. "It's slightly off my line. But I'd give all I ever hope to possess to solve this Blind Spot. I can feel it. Huh! It gives me the creeps— Listen!"

They were sitting close by the door, facing each other. Something stirred inside—slowly, mysteriously, like a cloth dragged across the floor. Instantly the tense atmosphere deepened into a voidlike suspense. Jimmy Fuillard slipped nervously from his chair; but the German stepped forward; he caught the door handle, pulled it open. The silence that had been so maddening before was swept away by a vibration of musical rhythm, ethereal and thrilling. Then—a sound like a bell—far off, ringing a clarion of strange warning.

Ding, dong! Ding, dong! Ding, dong!

But there was not a thing in sight—the room was exactly as it had been. Frederick Van Tassel crept along the wall, waiting. Fuillard kept by the door. The sound continued: Ding, dong! Ding, dong! Ding, dong!—dying at length into vibration and at last into silence. But just at the final instant, a tiny dot focused in the center of the ceiling—a fiery intense blue, flashing intermittently and dying out. That was all.

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The little chemist had seen enough; he returned, picked up a chair and placed it in the doorway. Fuillard was mopping his forehead.

"Well," asked the attorney in a whisper, "what was it? Now I'll believe in Aunt Selena's ghosts. There's something in this room."

But Frederick Van Tassel did not answer; he had seated himself for a long vigil, watching the Blind Spot.

CHAPTER XVI.

FLANNING'S VENTURE.

IT was a grim wait after that. The German, once the miracle had given its manifestation, had closed up like a clam, sitting quietly, while he waited, his eyes set on the place where the dot of blue had appeared on the ceiling.

Two hours went by, during which the nervous attorney explored the recesses of the house, going over the rooms upstairs and turning the books in the library. Finally he walked over to his Aunt Selena's, with a view towards lunch.

The old lady had prepared just what he was after. She set it out on a tray, and brought forth the inevitable apple pies. With this as an opener, he returned to the silent German, spread the meal on the table and called him over. Frederick Van Tassel ate.

"You know," he said, when he was through, "I haf been having a lot of thought. Dot thing in there reminds me of a friend—a Professor Heisen in Berlin. That was long, long ago. We were discussing a little thing called life. Und Heisen told me a peculiar thing. He says: 'Van Tassel,' says he, 'Mebbe we will never know what it is. But just the same we know it iss—don't we? Some day dis life vat you see, will be found—what you call, isolated. And ven we do dot—whuff—ve will know everything.'"

"Then you think it's life?" asked Fuillard.

"Mebbe it's death," came the grim reply. "But bah! Vat do we care about that? It iss good to die learning something. Und"—pointing with his thumb—"in there iss a secret of the Universe."

However, he did not return to his vigil; instead, he began going over his notes, taking more, and peering through the odd corners of the building. But not for a moment was he idle; the day had drifted along; soon it would be dark. Flanning woke up, staggered into the library. The German asked for the papers he had found, went over them carefully, and asked for the detective's experience. At last he spoke.

"There is no doubt of it at all," he announced. "We're in some sort of vibration—a sort of vestibule of the Unknown. It's governed by frequency—and ruled by time. But just what dot period may be, we cannot tell. Mebbe it's a minute. Mebbe a year—or a lifetime."

He pointed to the stone in the panel. "If you will notice how it acts. Put your hand close by. Radio-active—like der X-ray—only different. Everything—v i b r a t i o n. Light—matter—electricity—life! Und if everything else answers the law, why must one thing be excluded? The Rhamda was a real scholar. He could have told all the scientists of the earth cards and spades. He could make matter. *Ya!* Und he could control it just so far—no farther."

He smiled suddenly and nodded to the attorney.

"Vat does your aunt, der one who

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makes der pies, think about der business?"

"Ghosts!" came the answer.

The German laughed. "Und she's right, mine friend! She's right. All my life I live a skeptic; but now I know. It's ghosts w'at lives in the Blind Spot. Mebbe it's a little piece of hell, eh?"

His humor was sardonic; fatalistic. "Sure," he went on. "The good Doctor Holcomb, he says to his class how he will lift the screen of the Occult. He got killed. But I'll bet he learned something first." He consulted his watch. "Let's see. I've been here eight hours. Und I want to sit up all night. I think I'll take a little nap."

WHATEVER could be said about Frederick Van Tassel, he could not be accused of an overstress of emotion. He was as cool as ice, deliberate. The atmosphere in the house was tense—voidlike in its immensity. Yet he did not care. His short back disappeared through a bedroom door; five minutes later he was snoring.

"What do you think of him?" asked the attorney.

"I—I wish I had his nerve," answered the other. "I thought Hal Watson possessed courage; but that little fellow—"

"Just a matter of viewpoint," grunted Fuillard. "Lack of emotion. Mathematics! Cold as steel. It's a problem with Van Tassel—that's all. With us it is something else—mystery, life and death, a fine young man taken before our eyes. Calamity! What will happen? Also, I can feel the stress every minute—it gets on my nerves; I feel like I'm about to explode. I could not define it if I had to."

"What happened while I was asleep?"

Fuillard related the incident of the blue dot, and the sounds, especially that of the ringing bell. The detective nodded.

"Exactly. That's the thing that happened when the Spot took Hal. I didn't see the beginning, but I got the end. A flash of iridescence. He was knocked into kingdom come. Yet the little fellow is right when he calls it vibration. The stones govern it somehow. I'll swear to that. The trouble is—to set them off. It's like playing with dynamite."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this," answered Detective Sam Flanning. "I'm sick of waiting. And I don't propose to take this thing as a Dutch experiment. When I called you up, I had just been knocked cold. And—"

"You mean you wouldn't have called me otherwise?"

"Not that. Please don't mistake me. What I'm getting at is that I want to reach Hal Watson. I was blurred and confused then; but now I've had some sleep—"

"Still I don't get you."

"Well, I'll come right out with it then. I'm going to shoot the works. And if there's such a thing as getting through, I'm going to take a dive. They got that kid—and I'll follow."

"How about your friend in there? It really wouldn't be fair to leave him out. And how will you go about it?"

The detective pointed towards the stairs. "Up there," he said, "is where we'll set it off. I don't know just how the thing works, but each time it has brought results. As for Van Tassel, mebbe he wouldn't stand for me making the experiment."

The snoring in the next room had suddenly ceased; the place became silent. Jimmy Fuillard opened the door

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and glanced in at the Blind Spot. But there was nothing unusual in sight. He turned back.

"Tell me," he whispered, "just what I am to do. Make it as definite as you can."

Detective Flanning did just that; finally, when the last detail had been arranged, he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, announcing:

"This time I'll be ready. How's my automatic?" he patted his pockets. "Everything is all set."

It was a hard moment; looking the detective in the eye, Fuillard could feel that he would never see him again—and that death would be the sure result. He gripped the officer's hand. His lips moved:

"Flanning. You're a friend worth having. You—"

But the other cut him short.

"Shucks," he grunted. "This ain't nothin'. Like our German friend says: 'It's an honor to die learning something.'"

The other turned; a second later his steps sounded pit-a-patting up the stairs. Detective Flanning looked in at the German, saw his body sprawled out, and backed away. He felt that he was getting his last look at the world. Softly he stole to the door and gazed down at the city; then with a nod he returned and opened the door of the Blind Spot.

NOTHING happened. For five minutes he waited, peering for the beginning of the miracle. The silence deepened; there was only the weirdness of his own breathing and the pounding of his heart. Not that he was afraid—far from it. It was the suspense. Finally he stepped through the door into the library and listened at the stairs.

What was wrong?

"Hello," he called. "Hello! Fuillard! Oh, Jimmy!"

A sound of some one shuffling around was his only answer; the door at the head of the stairs creaked on its hinges, pounding out a volume of sound. Then, footsteps again. Some one whistled and dropped into a humming tune.

Yes, it was Fuillard. Perhaps he was just slow. Detective Sam Flanning returned to the library, stopped and waited, listening. All at once he heard a sound—a man was walking directly behind him. Came a voice:

"Vat iss?"

It was the German, armed with a heavy automatic, peering through his spectacles. The air was snapping with suppressed magnetism, electric, almost afire.

"Vat iss?" came the challenge. "Oh! You! I see. It was a dream I have—such a wonderful dream—and dot little—" then noticing Flanning in his shirt sleeves. "Where is Fuillard? Did something happen? Hey, Flanning! Listen!"

From the head of the stairs came a strange sizzling murmur—like the splash of red-hot iron in a bucket of water, steaming and seething, followed by a different sound behind them. They looked at the stone in the panel; it had suddenly reddened, turned into blue and dropped to a snow whiteness, alive and sparkling. Simultaneously a splash of clamor came from the room of the Blind Spot.

It was a bell—tolling, tolling! That everlasting tocsin, pounding its rhythm of clamorous warning.

"Ding dong! Ding dong! Ding dong!"

Flanning reached the room first, the German banged behind him. Both men hung back for an instant—listening.

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The bell continued; but there was not a thing in sight—merely the walls and the soiled paper on the ceiling. Behind them came a rush of steps—a man running down the stairs. But Flanning had no time for that—there was a sound behind the bell; it was increasing into a roar—a screaming and shouting. The roar grew to bedlam—increasing gradually in tone and volume like a mighty sea.

There it came—the dot on the ceiling, a livid blue—like all the hues of the rainbow centered into that one color, coruscating, flashing, afire, followed by the drooping string of incandescence weaving like a snake, pulsating and alive. It seemed to grow—filling the room, spreading.

There came the glimpse of vision—a vast throng, facing a round circle of white—a million beings in a storm-tossed landscape; or was it a building—vast, immeasurable, like the seething immensity of an ocean whipped by a typhoon. And every one of the million was gazing towards the room of the Blind Spot.

It was an army—a surging mass of uniformed men, moving towards the stairs and the round white stone. Three men were waiting in the center, while another stood to one side, frantically lifting a long bamboo up and down. The bell clanged again! One of the leaders rushed forward. At the same instant, Sam Flanning, the detective, leaped to meet him. Then—

There was just one split second of vision; the man with the bamboo levelled his stick, the whole thing vanished, and Flanning toppled upon his face.

Van Tassel sprang for his friend. He was calling to Jimmy Fuillard:

"Quick! Quick!" he was saying. "He is dying! *Mein Gott!* It has come true! Now I haf seen der Blind Spot!"

CHAPTER XVII.

INSIDE THE SPOT.

THE human mind is a miraculous instrument.

The last thing that Hal Watson remembered was that streak of incandescence, the form of a man he knew as the Senestro, and Flanning. The whole scene had been jumbled into a conflict of rolling, fighting bodies. Then he had fallen into the light. After that he knew nothing. But now—

He straightened up, groped about, looked around. His mind was still in a whirl; he could not believe what his eyes were seeing. His ears caught strange sounds, indescribable and weird. Yet he was still Hal Watson, alive and alert.

That was the most important thing of all.

But where was he? What had happened? Certainly he was no longer in the house at 288 Chatterton. The very air had changed; there was a suggestion of immensity, a roar like a battling army. Then—like a flash, his surroundings began to visualize; he looked afar at a scene of bewildering proportion.

It was like no place on earth—a niche cut out of storms, cyclonic, a sort of throne with a sweep of silver stairs that dropped like the flow of leaping water. And beyond, as far as he could see, was an amphitheater, crowded with living beings, shouting, gesticulating, frenzied.

But what an amphitheater!

His eyes swept on towards the distance, where countless columns twisted themselves to the heavens, like inverted

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waterspouts. Architecture beyond conception—all of it woven into color, as tremendous as the crack of doomsday! It might have been a temple—anything. Hal Watson staggered back.

The roar continued; strange bugles were sounding. The rhythmic vibration had given way to martial clamor. He could see an army marching, straight for the stairs. That was his first sensation.

The second was more relative. His feet began to tingle; his muscles twitched as though he had suddenly transgressed a field of magnetism. But it was not electricity, as he had known it. Rather, it was subtle, filling him with life and exhilaration. What could it be? What?

He glanced down, moved his foot, and wondered. He was standing on a peculiar substance, white as snow, circular in shape, and about twenty feet in diameter.

A snow stone! The same substance he had seen at the house at 288 Chatterton—magnetic and alive, built into a dais that extended about sixty feet on either side, hedged by silver walls, polished and adorned by golden scroll work. Behind him was a throne, cut from a solid jewel—green as the purest emerald.

IT was like a dream—or a nightmare! The roar continued; he could hear drums and bugles. The silver stairs had filled with the oncoming bodies. Suddenly, a line of figures circled about the dais.

Figures? Men and others! The men were garbed in crimson and gold, splendid creatures; and handsome. But their companions?

Hal Watson gasped.

They were not men at all; rather, they were animals, gorillas, half human, half beast. Catlike, they circled about the dais and waited.

But Hal Watson was growing strong. He moved about, puzzled but unafraid. From his toes to the top of his head he could sense the power of the snow stone. He was a man inspired. He turned to the head of the stairs, where one of the red clad warriors confronted him.

It was the Senestro!

The man was speaking; his lips curled into a sneer, his handsome face flecked with evil.

"Ha! Sir Watson," came his words, "I have you! At last you have been delivered to my hands. The secret of the Spot of Life shall be revealed. Kneel to the Bar Senestro!"

But Hal Watson had no such intention. He could not understand why; but each flick of a second doubled his strength. Kneeling was against his inherited instinct. His answer was a laugh. Again the man spoke:

"You would defy the Senestro? Fool that thou art. Know you not that you are destroyed—already dead? Fool! To-day—to-morrow, in twenty-four hours we will conquer. You and your kind will go! I tell thee, kneel!"

This time he swung his arm. From the depths of the cyclonic temple arose a roar like thunder. Around the dais the Mongol-faced gorilla men crouched, their teeth bare, every muscle aquiver. They were setting on their toes ready to spring. Like a man in a dream, Hal saw it all—the line of figures about him; the red clad men on the stairs, and the Bar Senestro in front of him. Beyond, was the dim immensity of receding distance—a million men, clamoring for he knew not what.

It did not seem real. It could not be real!

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"I tell thee, kneel!"

It was the Bar Senestro barking the command. But for some reason, Hal did not move. He was galvanic, his muscles tingling with the strange essence of super-vibration; his mind flashing with genius strokes. Whatever his life was to be, he was sure he would enjoy it. Still that command.

And simultaneously with the command a green light appeared in the distance—vast and round, like a living flame. It circled in a pinwheel, shedding concentric rings and finally dimming into a yellow dot.

Instantly the clamor changed. This time it was a yell of despair—screams of rage. The Senestro turned; he held something to his lips. A shrill whistle was the result. Instantly the line of gorillas charged. Hal Watson struck with rights and lefts; living the ecstasy of death. The dais swarmed with hairy bodies; they surged and twisted, heaving him up and on towards the stairs. And at last one of them must have struck him. The lights went out! The world was filled with darkness!

WHEN Hal awoke he was in a different place—apparently a selected apartment; at first glimpse it looked like an anteroom, circular in shape and splendid in design. The walls were curved, circling from a domed ceiling almost to the floor, built of neither wood nor plaster; and colored with beautiful onyx. The effect was perfect, streaks of mixed and bursting hues, reds and greens and vermilions, shot with golds and silvers, polished with an easy, comfortable sheen.

The room might have been thirty feet across, with a doorway at either end; but with no sign of a window. A bench or two adorned the sides, with several rugs of an unknown texture upon the floor. Next, he noticed the bed upon which he was lying—a heavy posted Napoleonic affair with a canopy top. The coverlets were soft; the material was more than silken, and lighter than any stuff he had ever known. Straight in front of him was a sort of clock, halfway to the break in the wall, ticking the solemn music of time.

"Tick tock, tick tock."

That was the only thing that was natural. It reminded him of waking on a summer's day—with the sun shining, and the vigor of life calling him into the outside world. Yet—

And then his mind woke up. He straightened and stretched, gaped, and looked again. For the first time he really became conscious of what had happened. He remembered the gorillas—the Bar Senestro, and the temple of the storms. Once more the notion of dreams returned. The thing simply couldn't be possible.

He lay back on the pillows, gazing at the surroundings—scenting a perfumed air. From afar came a strange murmuring undertone, musical with the vibration of tiny bells—the same rhythm he had heard through the Blind Spot.

And that brought him back where he had started. The Blind Spot? Oh, yes! Everything was becoming clear. The whole drama paraded before him—from the beginning.

This was the Occult!

Professor Holcomb, his grandfather, had promised to tear away the screen that shrouds the unknown—to flood it with the light of day. But the professor had become lost. And then his own father had been killed. And there was a detective named Flanning who had come to Hal's home in Berkeley. He had told a strange story and they had

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journeyed over to the house at 288 Chatterton. There they had discovered the new stones and watched the phenomenon of the Blind Spot. Again the question came up:

Was this the Occult? The place was real, as certain in substance and material as the earth. And he was alive! Alive? The words of the Senestro rang in his ears. "You are dead! Given into my hands!"

Could it be true?

Hal Watson sat up in the bed; he pinched himself to see whether he was awake. There was no doubt of it. And yet— Something had happened. He felt sure that he was close to the room at 288 Chatterton. Perhaps he was in the same apartment. And if that were so, the places were identical. He recalled a law of physics. "No two bodies can occupy the same place at the same time." The law is fundamental—as certain as the fact of substance.

He was stunned. The sequence of events whirled by, one after another, until he arrived on the snow stone. He recalled the gorillas, and the man who had ordered him to kneel. Then—the end had come!

But the most puzzling fact of all was that every scene had been consecutive down to the very end. It was like predestination, the working of some vast law. But what was the law?

Life or death? They are facts; and therefore have a law to govern them, a law, that, once known, would explain everything. The man who held it could rule destiny!

HE lay still, listening; suddenly his attention was attracted by a shadow beyond the first doorway. He noticed that it led into a long corridor. Some one was moving, talking softly. He heard the voice:

"He's the one! The Bar Senestro will have it out of him before night. Then we shall see the day. What say you?"

But the man addressed did not reply. Hal Watson strained his ears, listening. What could the speaker mean? What was the information the Bar Senestro was after? And why the tone of suspense? Once again, he went over that last moment upon the snow stone—the scene in the temple, and the rush of murderous gorillas. Then, just as suddenly, he thought of the house at 288 Chatterton, of his own San Francisco, and his friend, Detective Flanning, all of them unaware of the danger.

Danger of what?

Could it be that the horde he had seen was planning to break through? It didn't seem possible; but if one could go, so could a million. He listened again; but there was no further sound. Then he glanced to the side of the bed where his clothes were spread upon a wooden bench. In a moment he had slid from the coverlets and dressed. He started for the door.

But just as he reached the threshold, the shadow dropped across his path. A soldier in uniform stepped before him, saluted, and barred his way.

"Wait, my lord! In a moment!"

At the same time the soldier made a gesture with his hand and whistled. Immediately a number of unseen doors gave forth a guard, lining the corridor from end to end; soldiers, as erect and disciplined as any he had ever seen. Simultaneously an officer appeared from the far side with two of the unseemly gorillas at his back; saluted, and marched to their head. Hal noticed his military precision and pride; but he could not understand the beasts, shuffling along behind.

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They were almost three feet wide at the shoulders, their arms dangling to their knees, their black eyes snapping viciously. Now and then they gave a chattering sound, looking this way and that. Six feet away the officer halted. Hal Watson spoke:

"Well," came his words, "you look good. And you seem natural. But first of all tell me what it's all about. Where am I?"

The officer answered in English:

"That, my lord, you will know presently. I shall take you to the royal Bar. The Bar Senestro! King of the Thomalia. Come!"

The guard wheeled, forming behind. The gorillas stood on either side, the officer in front. Hal Watson felt exactly like a man between two vicious dogs, expecting every second to be bitten. At the command he followed the officer. The company swung into step. But not so the gorillas; instead, they lurched along leisurely, snapping their teeth as they walked. Finally they came to the far end, passed through an arch and into a long room. Undoubtedly they were in some immense building.

At the end of the hall was another corridor opening upon some sort of a plaza and leading to a stairway wide enough for twenty men to descend abreast. All of it seemed to be constructed of onyx—carved and splendid. The air was perfect, perfumed by an unknown fragrance. From afar floated that undertone of melody he had noticed from the beginning. That and something else. As they approached the landing, Hal Watson caught the sound.

This time it was different; confused, tumultuous—the voice of a great city, of a multitude. He could hear traffic, shouts and clamor. And above it all, he could catch the indefinable exhilaration of suspense—the vibration of a mob. It sent a chill up his spine. The gorillas by his side turned to look, clicking their teeth and chattering. Ahead of them was an open door leading to a balcony far above the street. Hal looked and wondered.

It was a place he had never seen—a vast city, tremendous with domes of myriad colors, minarets and spires, streets and plazas; multitudes and sounds. The fact was tremendous—and beautiful. Again he caught that fragrance, and music; like all the flowers and birds of the world in the joy of June-time.

At first glance it might have been a convention; but almost immediately it became a vast throne room, magnificent, with silver walls and golden scrolls, the whole thing wrought by super craftsmanship into a setting as superb as the work of a Michael Angelo, and fused upon the central point of the building—two low thrones at the end, both of them carved from a substance which Watson could not identify, but which might have been amethyst or sapphire. The thrones were casting a scintillating light—obscuring the occupants with a blaze of glory.

Hal Watson was blinded with the effect. But presently he could see. One throne was occupied by a maiden—a princess in beauty and in fact. The other, slightly higher than the first, held the Bar Senestro!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE THREAT.

IT was Hal Watson's first chance to study the man, or rather king, for surely here was a royal setting. The Bar measured up to the rôle, as handsome as an Alexander, perfectly poised,

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his splendid body clothed in a dazzle of red and gold. But it was the same man with whom Hal Watson had battled only a few hours before—the man who had come only a few days previously for his father in Berkeley.

The king arose; instantly his handsome face altered; a sneer curled around the corner of his mouth.

"Kneel!" came the command.

Hal could feel the guard filling around him, forming a crescent; the two gorillas stepped closer. But, for some reason, he had no intention of obeying. His eyes sought the princess on the lower throne, caught her glance and interpreted a soft curiosity. Her jeweled hand was half lifted; her lips parted.

"Kneel!" This time the king waved his hand; but he was stopped. The princess half rose; the kindly interest in her blue eyes had become something else. Her words snapped:

"My lord Senestro! Beware! Wouldst thou have thy equal kneel?"

"My equal?" The king had turned, his voice soft and scornful. "Dost thou call this weakling my equal?"

"Aye, my lord Senestro. Thy equal—perhaps thy superior. And as for the weakling—I can see by his eyes that he is a better man in the stuff that makes pure manhood. Remember, he is a prince of my own people. Aye, beware!"

She had half risen, her breast heaving, her anger defiant. The creatures behind Hal's back chattered and snapped their teeth. The Senestro took a step forward, made a sign with his hand. Instantly the guard drew closer. One of the gorillas caught hold of Hal's arm, almost pinching it off. But immediately the queen arose. Her beauty became intense. She swung her hands.

"I tell thee, stop! Caswa! Balwa! Thy queen speaks. It is my pleasure! Thy master is before thee! Touch one hair of his head and I will slay thee on the snow stone. Caswa! Balwa!"

The effect was instantaneous; the two gorillas stepped in front of Hal Watson, chattered incoherently and knelt down. The queen spoke again.

"Sir Stranger, they are thy slaves. The only things in the Thomalia who can be thy friends. They and myself. The power of the Senestro shall not pass beyond the Spot. Let thy legs stand firm. Kneel thou not to a Senestro!"

Hal Watson could feel a multitude of eyes glued upon him. He looked at the king, expecting an answer; but instead, the Senestro broke out in laughter.

"Ah," he snapped. "Little vixen! Spoken like thy mother—the Nervina! Thou wouldst defy the Senestro even as she. But remember, her followers and thine are dwindled. She is no more. The Senestros are supreme. The Rhamdas are extinct. Your philosophy is dead. In its place we have truth. The laws of dimension—and facts! We shall solve the Spot of Life. And we have the man!"

The queen had returned to her throne; it was plain that she was helpless; she kept clasping and unclasping her hands; all the while looking at Hal Watson. Suddenly she rose again.

"WOULDST thou?" she asked the Senestro. "I know his people. They are brave and noble. Look thou at this man. Canst thou not see that he is handsome? Better than thyself."

The words were spoken out of the heart, helplessly. Hal Watson could sense the despair, without knowing the meaning. Nevertheless, it was easy to

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see that, down deep, was a great purpose. Who could the queen be, and what was her relation to his own kind? And who was the Nervina? A murmur arose from the multitude. From afar, beyond the building, came a deep boom, like the bursting of a rocket or bomb.

The Senestro listened; he spoke to one of his counselors; turned toward Watson.

"Thou art indeed handsome," he laughed sneeringly, "but helpless withal! Knowest thou the meaning of this?"

He waved his hand. Hal glanced at the assembly, at the array of soldiers and the senatorial dignitaries in front.

"I know nothing, O Senestro!" he answered. "I cannot understand. I return the question. Where am I?"

"Perhaps you are dead," the words came clearly. "Perhaps not. That is for you to find out. Knowest thou of the Occult?"

Hal Watson was staggered; once before he had been pronounced dead. Each step he had taken had seemed to confirm the promise of his grandfather. Yet for all that, he was still very much of the living. He glanced over at the queen. She was watching his every move.

"I know nothing," he answered. "It is like a dream. Only yesterday I was in Berkeley; and now?"

"Thou art in Thomalia," the other interrupted, "in the city of the Mahavoisal! Behold!"

He gestured with his hand; one of the officers of the guard stepped forward, caught Hal by the arm, and led him to the window. Instantly, the world seemed to change, to open up its vastness and engulf him. He had caught a glimpse once before; but what he now beheld was past believing.

The city was without end, extending along a vast plain, filled with plazas and parks, thronged by an army, tented, bivouacked, prepared. The landscape was full of serried columns, troops as far as he could see. Beyond lay the blue waters of a peaceful ocean, and over to one side, the sweep of a terrific mountain. He drew back. What was the meaning of the army?

The Bar Senestro sensed his thought.

"How long," he asked, "do you think San Francisco can stand against us? They go within twenty-four hours. And then you and thine—the human race—shall end."

The pronouncement was stunning. The earth man was silent; he could not believe. But not so the queen. She had risen, defiant to the last.

"Perhaps it is so, my lord Senestro," she said, "for well I know you would destroy my people. But remember! The secret is not thine. Your science has failed. And but for the—"

The Senestro laughed. "Aye," he answered, "and but for the cycle of the Spot of Life, we could not succeed. But remember! I have, myself, gone through. And here before me I have the man."

He clapped his hand; a group of soldiers stepped forward. But at the same instant the queen spoke:

"Caswa! Balwa! Do thy duty."

What happened Hal Watson never knew. The action was too swift. The huge gorillas had swung like cats, reached out for the soldiers. Men flew here and there. One of the guards was thrown through the air, splashing against the side wall. A whistle was blown. Immediately the fight stopped. The queen beckoned.

"So, my lord Senestro," she snapped, "beware! And remember, there are others! This man thou shalt

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respect. 'Tis I that have spoken. The Aradna, daughter of the great Nervina, queen of the Thomalia. Defy me if you dare!"

And with that she turned from the throne, spoke to her maids in waiting, and was gone.

CHAPTER XIX.

DISINTEGRATION.

FLANNING was dead or very close to it, after that encounter with the Spot.

Van Tassel began lugging the detective's body into the library. He placed it upon the couch, ripped open the shirt. But there were no marks. Jimmy Fuillard was bathing the man's forehead. He asked:

"Dead? Van Tassel, tell me, is he dead?"

The other worked frantically; finally he looked up. His eyes had a strange look.

"Call a doctor," he said grimly, "quick. But be sure you get a physician with common sense. None of these quack know-it-alls."

Jimmy Fuillard needed no more; in a moment, he was at the telephone. Ten minutes later an automobile stopped at 288 Chatterton. A doctor of middle age, slightly bald, ascended the steps, turned about and looked around. Fuillard met him at the door, conducted him into the library. Van Tassel was leaning over the body.

"So," he muttered, gleaming at the doctor. "Here he is. Do what you can; but no monkey business."

It was a queer way to talk to a physician. Jimmy Fuillard wondered. The doctor knelt, went to work. Suddenly he looked up, began asking questions; but the German cut him short.

"Vat I want to know is whether he is dead? No, he ain't sick. Dot man wasn't sick a day in his life. He was perfectly well up to a half hour ago."

"I would call it a heart attack," replied the surprised medico. "But I don't think he is dead. I'll summon an ambulance, take him to the hospital for treatment."

"Und kill him," cut in the German. "No. You won't do dot. If he's alive, he has a chance. But that chance comes right here in this house. The man is dying of vibration. *Ja!* We keep him here."

A physician runs into all sorts of amateurs; but here was a man who was different. The atmosphere and the setting were unusual. He looked over at Van Tassel.

"Vibration?" he asked in a puzzled tone.

"*Ja,*" said the German. "You do not understand. Neither do I. But it iss so. Vibration and dimensions. Here he will live. Out there," pointing to the door, "he will die—like a fish out of water."

The doctor drew Jimmy Fuillard aside. At the mention of the Blind Spot, he lifted his eyebrows. Apparently he had read the story in the newspapers. He glanced in at the German who had crossed the room and was fumbling by the desk.

"Let me see," he said. "Professor Watson died of a heart attack, didn't he? This Blind Spot? Say—" he stopped and listened. "What's in this house?"

"It isn't natural," came the answer. "Wait a minute. I'll try to explain it to you."

Jimmy Fuillard explained what he could; then he conducted the doctor to the door and allowed him to walk through the veil of silence. The other

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listened, looked at his watch. Plainly he was puzzled.

"Let me see," he spoke decisively. "I have a date at the hospital. I'll call my colleague. This thing is too interesting to leave—also too important. Besides, there is that patient inside."

JIMMY FUILLARD took him over to his Aunt Selena's. A moment's work at the telephone was sufficient. Dr. Colyer was ready for the Blind Spot, anxious to uncover the phenomenon that had overcome the detective. First of all they moved the unfortunate Flanning to a bed. The doctor nodded to Van Tassel.

"All right," he said softly, "now I'll take a look at that room."

But the German shook his head; he pointed to the bed.

"How about dot man, Flanning?" he asked. "I asked you once—is he dead?"

"No."

"All right. Dot's all I want to know."

Without a word Frederick Van Tassel turned back to the desk, dug into the drawers and came up with a box of paper. He grasped a pencil and began dashing off figures. Jimmy Fuillard was astonished at his friend's rapidity—equations were born, formulas leaped out. The man had become an automaton, impersonal, scarcely alive. The doctor opened the door of the Blind Spot, peering inside. But of course, there was nothing.

Nothing?

Yes, there was, too. A flicker of sound drew his attention. Or was it sound? Jimmy Fuillard was looking over his shoulder. Suddenly he, too, caught the scraping, inarticulate movement. He stepped inside. At first he could see nothing; but presently he located the disturbance.

It was on the back wall, the one next to the kitchen, a tiny speck no larger than a pea, where a perfect hole had been eaten, or burned, straight through the partition, for all the world as though it had been sprinkled by some powerful acid. Yet there were no fumes and none of the ordinary reactions of a chemical nature. Even as they looked, the sides of the tiny aperture dropped off, disappeared.

The phenomenon was undoubtedly atomistic — beyond chemical explanation. The doctor grasped the fact at once. Here was matter disappearing into space. He turned about, beckoned to Van Tassel. Whereupon the pudgy German dropped his pencil, entered the room, stood with his hands clasped behind him.

"Well," he asked brusquely, "what about it?"

It was too much for Dr. Colyer. He gasped. Here was a miracle being worked before his eyes, and yet—the pudgy German was taking it as a matter of course.

"Can't you see?" he exclaimed. "That wall is being eaten up. It is disintegrating. It isn't natural."

But the German only nodded. "That's only w'at you think, Dr. Colyer. There isn't anything that ever happened in this Universe dot isn't natural. Otherwise there wouldn't be any Universe. Iss it not so?"

The doctor nodded; but Jimmy Fuillard was skeptical, exasperated.

"All right," the attorney snapped, "then you explain it. Explain this cursed Blind Spot—the whole damned mystery."

And that was just what Frederick Van Tassel proceeded to attempt.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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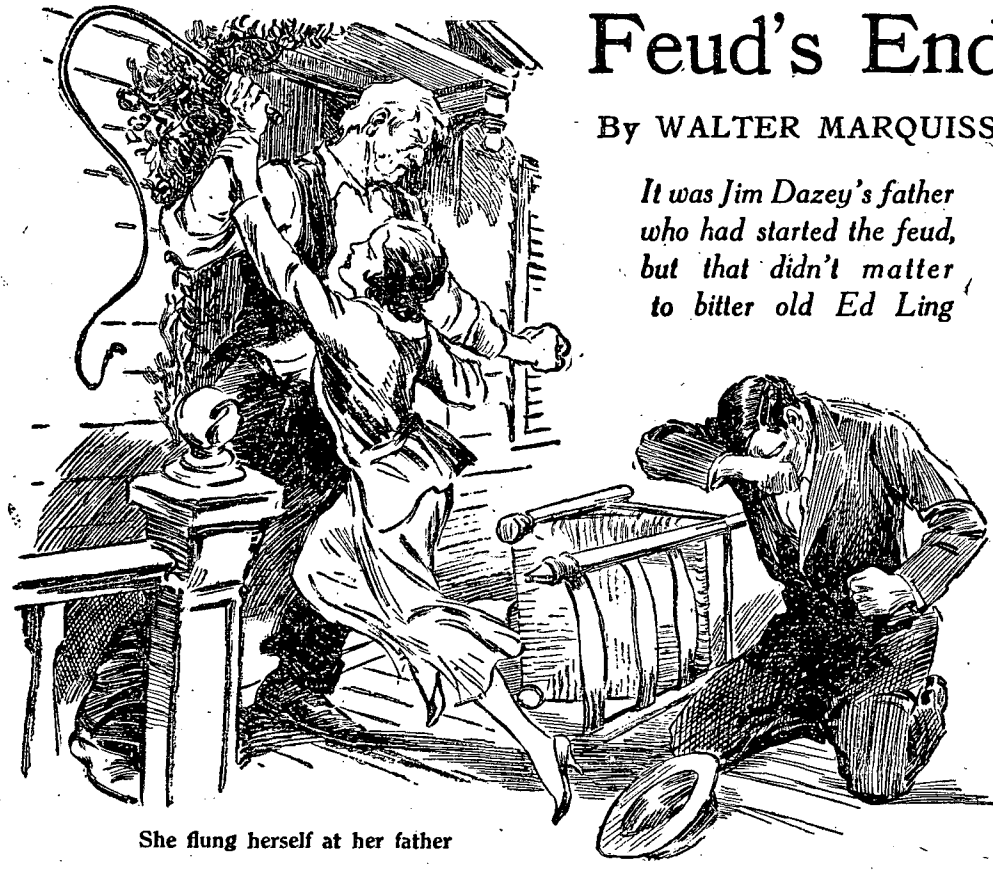
Feud's End

By WALTER MARQUISS

It was Jim Dazey's father who had started the feud, but that didn't matter to bitter old Ed Ling



She flung herself at her father

HOW'S that? Oh, don't mind if I do ride a ways, mister. It's quite a long drill for old legs like mine. Ah-h-h! This sure beats walkin', don't it? Thank you very kindly, sir.

These vi'lets? They are purty, ain't they? I come out here, plumb four mile, 'cause vi'lets grows bigger and brighter in Hick'ry Valley, where th' leaves is deep. I wanted 'em big and bright, 'cause they're for Jim Dazey.

Guess you don't live around here, do you? 'Cause if you did, you'd know who Jim Dazey was, and about him bein' in th' horspital goin' on six weeks, nobody thinkin' he'd live after it happened. But he'll be up and out soon.

How's that? Well, it's a kind of long story, mister. Jim Dazey, he's State's Attorney down here. Youngish feller, good lookin' and strong—use' to play football in college. Smart, too. Had to be—or May Ling wouldn't never of fell in love with 'im.

May, she's about th' purtiest thing they is around these parts, with her yellow hair and blue eyes, all th' time laughin', and a friend to ever'body and ever'body's dog. Smart as a whip—she's seckatary for Jedge Bangs, up in th' county court. Kind of surprisin' th' way she turned out, I reckin, seein' what her old man was.

Old Ed Ling, he was jest plumb ornery, I guess. Wasn't hardly ever

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sober, and needed killin' if a man ever did. He didn't have much use for Jim Dazey, 'cause years ago Jim's old man pulled a slick deal, and beat Ed out of th' farm he use' to live on. It was legal enough accordin' to law, I guess, but jest th' same, Ed he hated ever' last one of th' Dazeys. How's that? Yeah, I s'pose you would call it a feud, sort of.

Anyhow, you can see how he must of felt when he seen his daughter was keepin' company with old man Dazey's son. He kept still about it for a while, jest looking down his nose and glum. But one night when he'd been hittin' th' bottle, he seen Jim and May walkin' home together. And he lit in on her.

Well, sir, that girl wasn't fazed a bit. No, sir, not a bit. She jest stood up to her old man, and what she told him was plenty.

"Ever sence I can remember you've sneered at Jim Dazey's folks and hated 'em," she says, "till I'm gettin' sick of it and ashamed of my own father. I like Jim," she says, "and I intend to keep on bein' friends with him—"

Then Ed, he slapped her.

Well, she jest looked at him. Can you imagine it, mister—with her big blue eyes kind of deep and sorrowful, not sayin' a word, and goin' off to her room with a funny kind of jumpin' in her throat. You'd think it would make any man all-fired ashamed of hisself, but all Ed Ling done was go back in th' kitchen and take another nip out of his bottle.

NEXT evenin' Jim he walked home with her again, and this time she brings him right up to th' front porch with her. Ed, he seen 'em comin' and he set right in roarin' and cussin' like a crazy lunatic. He went in and got an old blacksnake whip, and come tearin' out again. And he wrapped that whip around Jim Dazey's face with a crack you could of heard a city block away. Jim goes down on his knees, well nigh crazy mad with th' pain. If Ed hadn't been her father, there'd have been murder done.

Well, sir, you'd of thought May was a tigress, th' way she went after that whip. Ed was tryin' to hit Jim again, but she yanked it out of his hand and slung it away out in th' middle of th' yard. Then she turned on her old man. Th' way her eyes snapped was a caution, lemme tell you, and even th' likker couldn't keep Ed from knowin' it was him she was talkin' to!

"You're a low, drunken beast, even if you are my father," she says. "I've stood by you, and loved you, and been th' best daughter I knew how. Now I'm through," she says, "and I'm goin'!"

Her pa, he never seen her like that before, and he jest blinked at her. She went in and packed some of her clothes, and when she went down th' walk she was cryin', Jim walkin' with her, talkin' low and carryin' her suitcase, and one arm around her.

Well, sir, Ed he didn't sleep a lick that night. He kept gettin' up and takin' nips out of th' bottle, and mutterin' to hisself, and hatin' like only a hooch-soaked old sot can hate. Sumpum kept tellin' him May wasn't never comin' back. And Ed, he loved his daughter. He wasn't all bad inside, y' understand.

Ed, he kept broodin' and broodin' on how Jim Dazey's old man had did him years ago, and now Jim was doin' him worse. He figgered May wouldn't of left home like that unless Jim told her to.

When mornin' come, his hate had

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got up to where it couldn't get no higher. He figgered th' world wasn't big enough for him and Jim Dazey to live in together. So he went staggerin' around lookin' for an old pistol, but couldn't find it nowheres. But he run acrost a rusty old plumber's hammer—you know, th' kind with a ball on one end of th' head.

We're comin' in to town now. You see where them two telephone poles is up there on th' Square? Well, sir, that's where Ed Ling seen Jim Dazey talkin' to May when he come lookin' for him.

Ed, he come through th' courthouse yard there, and starts acrost th' street towards Jim and May. He's got th' hammer in his hand, hid under his coat. He come lurchin' along, cussin' out loud, and seein' nothin' but th' feller he hates enough to kill.

All of a sudden they's a lot of yellin' and shoutin' and it's like a nightmare. Ed hesitates, kind of befuddled. They's a loud squealin' and scrapin', and he sees Miller Brothers' big five-ton truck rushin' at him, lookin' big as a house, an' Dave Miller scared stiff tryin' to stop it. Then Jim Dazey's white face comes flyin' towards him. Jim, he's dove off th' curb, and gets Ed around th' hips like he's playin' football again. Ed goes backward kerplunk on th' pavin'. He hears May screamin', men yellin' bloody murder.

Well, sir, Ed lays there on his back, blinkin' up, purty nigh sober now. He ain't got a scratch, but when he sets up, he sees th' truck has run right smack over Jim. And May's down there in th' dirt, purty pink dress and all, cryin', Jim's head in her lap . . .

Th' horspital's up th' street a spell from this next corner. If you'll jest lemme out here, mister— Thank you kindly, sir.

How's that? Me? Oh, I don't amount to much around here, mister—except I'm goin' to be th' father-in-law of a mighty fine young feller. My name's Ling. Ed Ling.

THE END.

The Kilts of the Bayas

THE Baya tribes inhabit the country adjacent to the upper course of the Sangha River, which later enters Belgian Congo and unites its waters with the Congo River. The tribesmen decorate their bodies with numerous scars, studiously carved into the flesh so as to form geometrical designs; and they also wear plain kilts which reach well above the knee.

When a Baya wants a new garment he does not bother about textiles and tailors. He just takes an ivory mallet, which is sometimes an heirloom several score years old, and goes in search of a peculiar kind of tree.

When the Baya finds a good specimen of Urostigma, he hammers at it until a large strip of bark detaches itself from the trunk. He then stretches that layer of bark on some big stone and keeps on pounding with monotonous, constant patience. After a few hours he has a large piece of soft, cloth-like material, which soon dries under the rays of the sun, so acquiring the resiliency and strength of a rough textile. The Baya then trims its edges with a few deft strokes of his knife and has a serviceable kilt, ready for use.

R. du Chalieu.

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Tyrant of the Steppes

By JACK ALLMAN

Author of "Boomerang," "Halloway's Debt," etc.

They struggled away from the burning church

Granville Parker staked all on that one desperate gamble against torture and death at the hands of a mad Soviet official

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

WHEN Granville Parker's plane crashed on the barren, icy wastes of Siberia, he was bent upon rescuing the possible survivors of the Search, a ship which had been crushed in the ice floes, and which had carried the members of a scientific expedition headed by William Barwell. With Gran Parker was Professor Barwell, father of the young man heading the party of the lost Search. The professor was killed in the crash, but Gran escaped unharmed, and swore to the old man that he would continue the hunt for his son and for the others of the Search's lost party.

An American fur trapper and reindeer breeder named Ericson, who had settled in this out-of-the-way spot, gave Gran his first news of the missing Americans. Then Gran learned that some of the men had survived

This story began in the Argosy for August 6.

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their experience, and that they were now imprisoned by a grafting Soviet official, "Mad Mike" Chichkin, the governor and tax gatherer of the district. Locally, Chichkin is usually spoken of as the *ispravnik,* though the term is an out-moded one. Mad Mike has imprisoned Barwell and his companions because they refuse to reveal to the official the location of a gold-bearing island which they have discovered. Some of the men he has already executed.

Chichkin, however, is being watched by a man named Varovitch—the agent of the dread *Ogpu,* or *Gay-Pay-Oo,* the powerful Soviet secret police. It has long been suspected that the *ispravnik* reserves for himself a large proportion of the taxes which he collects.

Chichkin throws Gran into prison, but the American, while in prison, succeeds in establishing communication with Barwell and the other imprisoned Americans.

Later, through the assistance of Vanya, Chichkin's beautiful feminine companion, whom Gran discovers to be a rebellious prisoner like himself, he manages to escape from prison. Vanya then hides him.

The *Gay-Pay-Oo,* Varovitch, accuses Chichkin of crookedness. Chichkin shoots him dead, then charges that Vanya has informed upon him, and says that he will see to it that she is blamed for the *Gay-Pay-Oo's* death.

But Gran, accompanied by an old ex-Cossack, Gurl Borka, rushes into the room, having heard the shots. Gran knocks Chichkin out, though not until after the *ispravnik* has killed Borka. Together, Gran and Vanya escape and go into hiding in the ice caves near the river. There they make plans for helping Barwell and his friends to escape from the prison; and Gran decides to enlist the help of Ericson, the American reindeer breeder.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ICE CAVE.

GRAN found Ericson just finishing a small shack that he had erected of timbers salvaged from the boat. Gran had to tell him who he was, whereupon the Norwegian shook his hand warmly. They went inside for *chypeet*—"a fill of tea."

"I've built this place," explained Ericson, "so that I can spend the winter here. I want to stay as far away from Kolyma and Mad Mikheal as possible. Away from the coast, here, the wind sweeps the snow from the tundra, and it's a good feeding ground for the deer. They don't have to kill themselves pawing down through the snow to reach the moss."

He asked Gran what he had been doing, what he had found out about Barwell and the other Americans, and why he was in the disguise of a native instead of the Russian, as he had left.

Gran told him the whole story, from beginning to end. He explained that if he could have some of Ericson's gun-cotton he was sure that they could release Barwell and his two companions.

"Hell, yes, take it all!" said Ericson, warmly. "Anything I've got."

Gran thanked him, and told him that if he could get four of his fastest reindeer and two sleds, he would see that he got paid some time.

"The Lord only knows when," he said, "but if we make our getaway, you'll be rewarded. If we don't—well, Ericson, you can always feel that you

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have done some fellow Americans a mighty good turn. We have no money now; but if you give us the deer, we won't need any. We have only one small revolver and three shells, but we can snare enough Arctic hare to keep us alive."

Ericson got up and paced the floor of his low hut. "There's no way I can help you about the gun situation," he said. "No one but the military and the *ispravnik's* licensed hunters can have guns any more. But if you make it away from Kolyma and want to get to the Bering, you'll have to pass near here. I'll have a store of food ready for you, and I've got money hidden away that you're welcome to. Your route will pass through native communities, and if you have money you can add to your food supply."

They went out and looked over Ericson's two best sleds. One of them needed repairing, and so the rest of the day was spent working on it.

"You can leave as soon as it gets dark," Ericson told Gran. "I will send Yakoot, one of my best deer drivers, with you, but as soon as you get near Kolyma send him back. These natives talk."

Gran explained that he would have to go back past the ice caves and pick up Vanya. He looked up at the dark wintry sky. "We'll have to wait until it is snowing and the wind blowing before we attempt it. We'll have to get away without leaving tracks that can be followed."

"There's the feel of more snow in the air right now," observed Ericson, as he led the way to the cache.

"No kind of fuse at all?" asked Gran as he carried the guncotton to the sleds.

"Nothing but those detonators and the explosive," answered Ericson.

Back at the cabin, Gran untwisted some fish net twine, rolled the softened fibers together and soaked them in highly inflammable seal oil. He made some tests, and found that they fed fire along at the rate of about two feet a minute.

"I'll have to use short ones," he said. "They flame too much."

DUSK found him ready to start. The Samoyed driver struck off with two fine deer attached to the first sled. Gran took one last look to see that everything was secure on his own. The case of explosive, closely packed in a number of dressed deer skins that Ericson had supplied for bedding, was snugly in place.

Gran stuck out his hand and returned the pressure of the ex-whaler.

"Watch your step now," cautioned Ericson. "Be sure to send Yakoot back from the caves; and don't forget that the food will be hidden along the trail back on the tundra, where I showed you. There'll be a small rag flying from a stick above it. That'll keep the foxes away, as well as mark the spot."

Gran nodded, and once more thanked the man. He spoke to the deer and they trotted off, eager to catch up with the span ahead.

The wind was rising, and the first few flakes of another snow storm were falling when he came to the bluff under which the caves wound their devious ways. He called Yakoot, the Samoyed, to a halt, and tied his own span of deer to the tail end of the forward sled.

Yakoot started back along their outtrail, and Gran drove the coupled deer into a thicket and tethered them.

He slid down the slope to the mouth of the big ice cavern, listened for a moment, and then went in. He whistled

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a few signal-like notes, so that Vanya would not be frightened, and found her waiting for him. Quickly he explained what he had accomplished, and while he nibbled at a piece of half-frozen cucumber, told her that from the looks of things they would be able to put their plans into action that very night.

"It is snowing a little now," he said. "If it increases, we will get on our way."

EVERY fifteen minutes or so, he made a trip to one of the cave portals; and after the fourth or fifth trip came back with word that he thought there was enough snow falling to drift a deer trail shut.

They rolled up the bedding, and Gran swung it to his shoulder. Vanya picked up the small bag of food in one hand and with the other clung to Gran's arm. Slowly he led the way out. Inactivity had allowed the cold to creep into their bodies, and they were both chilled as they stumbled up the slope.

Gran had Vanya's hand now, and he felt it suddenly tighten its grip as a thumping noise came to their ears.

"What is that?" asked the girl in a tight little voice.

Gran laughed to restore her composure. "Nothing to be frightened of," he said. "The deer bumping their antlers together is all."

"I wasn't exactly frightened," protested Vanya. "Only, this means so much to the boys in the dungeon up there—and it means so much to us—that I guess I'm a little nervous."

"I'd much rather you would wait along the trail," said Gran. "Then, if something goes wrong, you could probably make it to Ericson's place. His wife would shelter you."

"You're afraid my nerve may fail me?" she asked, in a hurt tone.

"No. You've plenty of that," replied Gran. "But if things don't go off as planned, there's liable to be a nasty mess around there."

"I'm used to nasty messes."

Vanya made herself a little nest among the skins on the rear sled, and Gran swung the deer around to head for Kolyma and . . .

Many things might happen to upset their plans, thought Gran as he drove along through the swirling snow. If Chichkin thought Vanya was in hiding in the town, he would probably have a cordon of soldiers strung around the whole place. They might not even be able to get to the church jail.

And what if the prisoners had been moved? What if Mad Mikheal, now that the *Gay-Pay-Oo* was dead, had already taken them to some other place to torture them into giving the information he so badly wanted?

As the first lights of the town showed up through the black night, Gran swung his deer off the main trail. Back through a boggy flat, over the marshy top of which was now a half-inch crust of ice and frozen mud, he made his way to the side of the settlement where the square was situated.

Vanya, leaning back against the case of explosive, and wrapped in warm furs, was evidently busy with her own thoughts. She hadn't spoken for over a half hour.

Gran felt a little put out that she had refused to take his advice and wait back along the trail, although he took off his hat to the cool nerve that had prompted her to see this thing through to the end.

"If Barwell gets his," thought Gran, "she'll take the contents of that vial!" The thought brought him to a sudden realization of the desperate nature of the game they were about to play. In

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an hour from now, this beautiful, wholesome girl sitting there on the sled might be cold and white in death. Both of them might be.

Gran's teeth came together hard. Well, what of it? Chichkin now had a free hand. If the boys weren't released at once, it would be too late; and Gran couldn't very well try to escape with Vanya alone.

". . . A promise made is a debt unpaid . . ."

SLOWLY, quietly, Gran led the deer into the thickets along the edge of the boggy flat. Through the swirling flakes he could see the lights shining from the windows of the buildings around the square. A hundred and fifty yards behind the Byzantine dome of the church he stopped the animals, turned them around and bedded them down.

"If they are off their feet, they aren't so apt to bump horns," he whispered to Vanya. She nodded, and continued at her self-appointed task of dividing the robes between the two sleds.

With fingers so numb that they seemed almost dead, Gran tucked the ends of his fish twine fuses into two fulminate of mercury detonators. The wind whistled through the bare branches over his head, and the hard, dry particles of snow stung his cheeks. With the fuses shoved up under his cap to keep them dry, Gran took four prisms of guncotton from the case, and turned to Vanya.

"Stay here with the deer," he said. "Stand at their heads. They'll bolt when the explosion comes if you don't."

"But I thought I was going with you!" she said.

"You're going to stay right here." There was no compromise in Gran's tone this time. It was an order.

"All right," she said, and it was the first time that he had ever heard anything that even smacked of meekness in her voice.

She stepped in front of him and took hold of both of his arms. "Gran," she said softly, "you're going to be successful!—I've prayed all the way up here that you will be. Take your time—bring them back.—Good luck!" Quick as a flash, she rose to her tiptoes and kissed him, then stepped aside to let him pass. "Good luck!" she repeated.

His heart surged. "Watch for us! Be ready!" he said.

He slipped ahead through the drifting flakes.

CHAPTER X.

THROUGH THE SNOW.

AT a rear corner of the log church Gran stopped. He could hear voices. He slipped up along a side wall, and saw that two soldiers were talking with the sentry at the door. All three had rifles, and Gran knew that the square was being patrolled. He waited till two of them had turned and walked away in opposite directions.

He couldn't follow them with his eyes, but he could hear the crunch of snow beneath their feet. He waited until they had covered their posts and returned to the church, making a mental note of the time it took them to do this. They spoke again amongst themselves, and then started off once more to cover their beats.

Quickly, Gran slipped back to the rear wall. He would plan to have his charge go off while they would be farthest away.

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With the knife that Ericson had given him, he dug at the dried mud and moss chinking till he found a place where a crook in a log left a space of almost three inches.

That would be fine. That way he could put his charge inside, and so blow the wall out instead of in. Two prisms should do it. He tied a couple together with a piece of fish twine, and inserted a detonator.

For a moment, the edge of his knife blade rested on the fuse a foot and a half from the dangerous explosive, then it slipped down to within a foot and cut. Thirty seconds! He'd have to run like the devil, but he'd best take that chance. Some one might see the flare of his match as he touched it off.

He slipped into the brush, put the other two prisms of guncotton in the snow, and crept back to the wall. He felt to see that the fuse was tight in the cap, then broke a sulphur match loose from its block.

Everything was in readiness, except that the soldiers were now all together in front of the building again. He waited; and while he waited, he tried to picture just what was going to take place in the next few minutes.

He was at the end away from the spot where the boys slept on the dirty straw inside. The charge would fall just behind the altar, he figured, so that the rear wall would be blown out. That end of the floor would also be blown down, so that there would be a hole for the boys to come out through. But they'd have to come fast!

The sentries started back along their posts. Gran got his match ready.—Blowing up a church! The disturbing thought struck Gran for the first time.

"God will forgive it," he told himself. "At least it isn't I who desecrated this church in the first place!"

The match flared. The oil-soaked string spluttered, almost died—caught. He pushed the guncotton through the wide crack and ran stumbling back into the brush. Fifty feet—a hundred—a hundred and fifty.

He stopped—dropped belly down in the snow. His heart beat out a steady measurement of time. It should go any second now. Silence, except for the whistling of the wind. Gran held his breath.

A minute! It must have been fully a minute since he struck that match. The crunch of heavy boots in the snow. The sentries returning.—Why didn't it go off? Had the cold seal oil squelched the tiny flame on the fuse tip? Had it gone out? Or had the cap or the explosive perhaps deteriorated, from alternate freezing and thawing.

THEN Vesuvius erupted before his eyes, with a roar like the firing of a monster cannon. There was a bright flash that was criss-crossed with dark lines—flying logs. Some of them landed not far from Gran.

He was on his feet before the side walls had even finished crumbling down. He ran forward. He saw a finger of red flame lick at the dry splinters of the flooring. Above the wind he heard shouts. At the place where the wall had been, he stopped and peered down into the dark, gloomy hole.

"Barwell!" he called. "This way! —Quick!"

Something moved down there beneath the growing flame. A whiskered face appeared, then drew back. Gran called again, and this time Barwell answered. With one arm he was supporting a companion, and trying to pull himself up through the *débris* with the other.

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Gran jumped down onto a fallen timber and gave them both a lift. "The other one?" he asked.

"Died yesterday," wheezed Barwell.

The flames were growing now, and so was the shouting. Gran started to lead the two men back, when into the light of the blazing floor he saw a soldier running.

He released his grip on Barwell's arm, and the young explorer fell to his knees. Gran whipped out his pistol and fired just as the soldier raised his own gun. He saw the sentry drop his rifle and grab at his shoulder, saw him stagger and fall.

He wheeled back to the two pitiful wrecks of men whom he had come to aid. Emaciated, they weighed almost nothing, it seemed to Gran. Barwell he half dragged under one arm. Barwell's companion Gran had swung upon his back. The man had just strength enough to cling there, with a little help from Gran's free arm. They tore through the brush. Every step, because of his wounded leg, was torture, but he made it back to where the deer were tied. Gran heard Vanya breathe a prayer of thanks as he reached the sleds.

When he released his hold on the men they both fell. Hurriedly he placed Barwell on the rear sled, and the other man on the sled ahead.

"You'll have to drive," he ordered Vanya. "They're both all in. The third man is dead.—Keep close to me. If they follow, and there's any shooting, come ahead and take my sled. Ready?"

The red flames of the burning church were high enough now so that Gran could see them through the trees as he whipped up his span of deer. Vanya's team followed.

Once out of the shelter of the thickets, the wind tore by unhindered. The snow swirled and eddied around them, and Gran knew that their tracks were being destroyed almost as fast as they were being made.

Instead of heading straight back for the ice caves, he cut off a little to the right. He could strike the main trail quicker that way.

Once he stopped to give the deer a short resting spell, and dropped back to see how Vanya was making out. She told him not to worry about her, she was getting along fine. She pointed to Barwell, closely wrapped in the soft skins.

"The poor dear is unconscious," she said.

Gran rubbed his wrists briskly for a few moments and then ran ahead to his team. Apparently, there was no organized pursuit yet, but he knew that there soon would be.

HE spoke to the deer, and touched them up with the long leather whip. They swung out across the boggy flat, with long trotting strides that ate up the miles. In the growing light of dawn, Gran saw the fog of the animals' breath as it steamed from their nostrils and froze to the hair of their necks and shoulders.

With the rising of the wind and the falling of the temperature, the snow ceased. Straight into the biting gale Gran held his course. The deer weren't trotting now. They tried to turn first to one side and then the other, anything but face the bitter wind.

Broad daylight caught them crossing a drifted hollow. Gran stopped his team and stumbled back through knee-deep snow to Vanya's side. He pointed to the hogback of high ground ahead of them.

"The main trail, the one that passes

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back of Ericson's place, is just over the hump there. I think you had better wait until I scout ahead. If we can't get into it without leaving tracks, we'll have to wait for more snow."

"Is there no other way to go?" she asked.

Gran shook his head. "Chichkin will have even this trail guarded some place up near the town. When he finds that we have taken neither the trail to the south, nor the one that leads east along the coast, he will know that we cut across this triangle leg and are on the one leading to the Bering. That's our natural course anyway."

"All right," said Vanya. "You look things over, and I'll see if I can bring Barwell around." She nodded her head to indicate the still figure on the sled.

Gran spoke to the other man, a chap who called himself Hyde, and told him to try and keep himself warm. "And get something into your stomach," he advised. "There's some grub in that sack behind you."

GRAN topped the low roll of higher ground, and looked off into the whistling gale. The dry snow was being whipped from the ground and tossed about to fill every little hollow or low spot; shifting like sand dunes.

There was no sign of the trail that ran from Kolyma to Ericson's place, and he knew that it, too, would be drifted full. He cut down to where a line of brush ran across the place where the trail should be. Carefully, he picked his way ahead, keeping his tracks hidden among the dark wands of the wind-whipped willows.

When he came to where he could see the cut where the trail crossed the line of brush he stopped. From a distance of fifteen feet, he could see that no sled had passed in either direction, for the protecting scrubby vegetation would have prevented drifting in the sheltered spot.

For a few moments Gran stood thinking out his problem. If the snow hadn't stopped falling, they might have gained the trail without leaving tracks. But now the tracks were no longer drifting over, and they would be plain reading to any searching party. He had no doubt that one would be along shortly. None had passed, so the trail had told him; and if he waited till they went down, he would also have to wait until they came back before it would be safe to take the trail. He decided that would be the best course to follow. They would hide in the hollow until the coast was clear.

He knew that there was no trail from the back of the demolished church for Chichkin's soldiers to follow; and as long as Gran didn't drive the teams into the main route along the coast, Mad Mikheal would be at a loss to know where to look for them.

As he went back to the others, Gran carefully brushed snow into the tracks which his feet had made.

The look on Vanya's face when he joined the little party told him that all was not well. She was still working over Barwell, while the deer foraged for food, moving the sleds a few feet at a time.

"He's starved, that's what's the matter with him," offered Hyde. "He only nibbled at the food which we were given in prison, leaving the most for Brown and myself."

"He's as thin as a rail," remarked Gran, moving Barwell to a more comfortable position. "What killed Brown? Starvation?"

"No—torture!" Hyde gritted the words.

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Gran glanced at Vanya. So that was the way Chichkin worked?—fast. The *Gay-Pay-Oo* hardly cold yet, and the *is-pravnik* was after the location of Barwell's gold supply.

"One of us would have gotten it today," said Hyde, "if you hadn't shown up." He staggered toward a span of deer and turned them back to the lowest part of the swale.

"Can't we do something for him?" asked Vanya, slipping off her little woolen mitts and warming Barwell's cheeks with her bare hands. "We can't let the poor boy lie here like this. We need hot broth. Something to put a little heat into his body."

Gran felt of the thin wrist. There was a slow, weak pulse that made him bite his lower lip. Barwell was far gone.—Vanya was right, they would have to do something.

"There are willows ahead here for a fire," he said. "But we don't dare build one. They'd see our smoke."

"He can't eat that cold, dried fish!" pleaded Vanya. "We'll have to build a fire."

Gran shook his head. "No. I'd rather break right through onto the trail and take a chance of making Ericson's ahead of Chichkin's outfit."

He looked down quickly as a weak, hacking cough came from Barwell's lips. He saw the lids flutter over the sunken eyeballs. Noticed the blue of the young explorer's lips.

"Let's go!" Gran snapped.

THEY swung the teams into line, and pulled up over the low hogback. Gran cut down for the nearest point on the main trail, no longer caring what tracks he left. With a dying man on his hands, he threw caution away in exchange for speed. The waiting game he had planned on an hour before was out of the question now.

When they swung onto the snow-covered track, which was nevertheless hard under foot, Gran stopped his span of deer. With a motion that told Hyde to follow, he stepped back to Vanya's sled.

As she glanced up from Barwell's marble-white face, Gran saw that her eyes were filled with tears. A little sob shook her, but she pretended that it was a shiver due to the cold wind.

"Hyde, here, will take your sled," he said. "He can ride, and he is strong enough to use the whip. You come ahead with me. Now that we have solid bottom to travel on, we're going to make time."

Without a word, and with only a last glance at the form on the sled, she did his bidding. Hyde took his place on the sled and picked up the whip.

"Keep close up," ordered Gran. "Don't drop behind, or you may have trouble with your deer. They'll travel better if you keep up close." He jerked his head toward Barwell. "Bad shape," he said in a lowered tone.

Hyde nodded.

THEY made good time, except where an occasional gully had to be crossed. Here the snow was belly-deep to the deer, and they tossed their antlered heads angrily as they lunged through.

Crossing a high point, Vanya pointed ahead to where a dark mass broke the white blanket of the snow.

"Ericson's deer herd," explained Gran. "He has thousands and thousands of them. They range along there, where the snow never has a chance to get deep on account of the unbroken sweep of the wind."

Jogging along behind the laboring

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sled deer, Gran watched the distant herd. Five miles, he figured. That would be just beyond where Ericson would have the food planted.

He glanced back. Hyde was keeping well up onto their heels. The figure with him on the sled was as still as death.

Vanya had looked back, too. She raised troubled eyes to Gran's face.

"I know it is a risk," she pleaded, "but you will stop at this Ericson fellow's place, won't you? We just *have* to get some warm food into him."

Gran nodded, but what he considered a woman's plea for the man she loved hadn't affected his judgment in the matter. The last time he had looked in Barwell's face, Gran himself had made up his mind to stop.

"We will pick up the food first, so that we won't have to pull back up the slope," he said. "And while you get something into him, I'll try and get fresh deer into the harness."

Vanya smiled her thanks, and again Gran wished that the way was clear for him to tell her what was in his heart. Of course, that was out of the question now. She had shown plainly that she was in love with the young explorer.

Yet had she? There was the matter of the hurried kiss the night before, just before he had blown up the jail. Gran thrilled at the memory, and then he laughed at himself. It had been nothing but an impulsive gesture—he had heard that European women were that way. He was foolish to give a second's thought to the caress which she had given him in that danger-fraught moment.

What was he thinking about, anyway? Hadn't she gone to Barwell, even before she had thrown that faint in order that Gran might escape and so help the young explorer? Hadn't she braved Mad Mikheal's wrath by going there to the church alone? She must surely be in love with Barwell!

But as he looked down at the brave little figure of the Russian girl, he wished with all his heart that he might have met her first. She was his kind. Never a whimper of complaint—putting up with hardships that would have been intolerable to most women. What a companion she would make for a man whose chosen work was to pioneer the air trails of the Arctic!

CHAPTER XI.

THE STAMPEDE.

JUST as they drove in among the stragglers of Ericson's herd, Gran spied the little flag that marked the food cache. He stopped and divided the load between the two sleds.

"That Mr. Ericson must be a dear!" said Vanya as they loaded dried fish and meat, sleeping bags, blubber and bladders of seal oil.

"As good as they come," agreed Gran. "Now we'll cut through the herd and pull down to his place. We'll get some warm broth into Barwell, and then we ought to get going again, right away."

His words caused Vanya to look back along the route over which they had just come. A little cry escaped her as she did so, and Gran saw coming fast along their tracks a span of deer. A tall figure was standing up, laying on the whip, and at his feet crouched two other figures with rifles in their hands and *papahas* on their heads.

"It's Chichkin!" shouted Gran, and then to Hyde, "Follow me! We can't drop down to Ericson's now."

He jumped to his sled as Vanya swung aboard. His lash cracked in the

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freezing wind. They tore off directly through the herd, with Hyde close upon their heels.

Far off to the side, Gran saw one of Ericson's Samoyed herders. The deer scattered before the rushing span on the sled. Big bulls shook their two-yard spread of antlers and snorted.

The dirty, trampled snow flew back in their faces as Gran and Vanya both urged the front team to greater speed.

A shot rang out, and the girl, clinging to the low rails, looked back.

"They missed," she cried. "Their sled's bouncing so much they can't take aim."

Gran's deer raced on nobly, but they were getting tired. He knew that Ericson had given him the best animals at his disposal; but the night's work, on short feed, was beginning to tell. The pursuing team was closing up the gap that separated them from Hyde and Barwell.

A cry from Vanya, and Gran whipped his eyes back over his shoulder. One of Hyde's deer was down. It struggled hard to get to its feet, and one front leg bent out at a sickening angle at the knee. More shots.

Gran pulled up his span, and just as he did so he saw the driver of the other team throw his arms in the air and pitch forward, falling almost on top of the injured deer. He had seen men fall that way before—they were usually dead before they hit the ground. Poor devil, Hyde! So near escape, and then to have been shot this way at the very moment when freedom was at hand.

VANYA gave a little cry that she quickly suppressed. Her calm voice broke through the involuntary exclamation. "That's Chichkin driving!" she said.

Gran looked and saw that she was right. Unmistakably, that was Mad Mikheal wielding the whip, while the soldiers clinging to the careening sled were trying to bring their guns into play again.

With the revolver in his hand, Gran measured the distance back to Hyde's sled.

Vanya must have seen in that fleeting second what was in his mind. At his first running step back along the trail, she threw herself in front of him. "Don't!—Don't try it, Gran!"

Gran started to push her aside, but she clung to him. "Hyde's dead, but I'm going after Barwell," he snapped angrily.

"Don't! I think he's dead too! You will be killed, Gran—don't go!"

Gran pushed her aside without a word. He could feel her fingers tearing at his sleeve. He leaped forward, and out of the corner of his eye he saw her pull the little vial from her pocket.

"Wait!" he shouted to her.

He fired one shot into the approaching span, and then swept Barwell's frail body into his arms. A glance told him that Hyde was beyond all help.

Gran was almost exhausted, partly because of exertion and partly because of the intense cold. With the young explorer's weight dragging at him, and the wound in his leg burning with each step, he stumbled ahead to where Vanya stood beside the sled. Three or four shots whipped close to them, and then there was a second of respite, for Chichkin had to swing around the crippled outfit.

Gran swung his whip. The willing deer leaped ahead, and the feeding herd scattered to the side with angry, frightened snorts. More bullets whizzed past. Some of the herd animals milled and

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swung back behind Gran's team. They offered him and Vanya some protection from the rifle fire behind, but Gran knew that this mad race couldn't last much longer. Chichkin's deer were fresher than his.

He still had one shell left in the revolver. He would try and get Mad Mikheal with that. One of the sled animals stumbled. Vanya gasped. For a moment Gran, too, thought it had been hit.

Then, ahead, he saw the leaders of the herd. They would soon be out of the herd and in the open again, where Chichkin's soldiers would have nothing to hinder their shooting. They passed out of the main body of deer, but they saw that there were still more ahead. A small band was being driven by a man in a rabbitskin *kulita*.

IN another minute they were up to him, and Gran saw that it was Ericson himself. The ex-whaler had evidently sized the situation up. His eyes were fastened on the three pursuers who were now trying to force their way through the milling sea of frightened deer.

As Gran came abreast, Ericson swung aboard the sled.

"Your oil!—Your oil!" He was clawing through the load. Vanya dragged at one of the bladders, but he tore it from her hands.

"Keep going!" he ordered Gran. "Get ahead of those pointers." He jerked his head to indicate the smaller bunch of deer which was separated from the main herd.

Gran swung his whip, but the Norwegian's actions didn't escape his notice. Ericson had stripped off his rabbit fur parka-like coat, and holding the bladder of oil in one hand, he ripped it with his knife, letting the half congealed liquid grease pour over the soft skins.

As the sled swung in ahead of the last of the deer, Ericson jumped, and touched a match to the oil-soaked garment. It flamed up into a hissing torch. He ran back, waving it into the faces of the startled deer.

Gran, quick to get the idea, picked up the tanned robe over which the rest of the oil was running, and did the same with it. Gusts of wind blew the flames back into his face as he ran back toward the herd. He felt the tight curling of his seared eyelashes and brows—he shut his mouth against the scorching breath of the flames. His mitts were afire, but still he and Ericson ran shouting into the faces of the deer.

The panic-stricken animals reared up on their hind legs. Antlers rattled. A mad bellowing came from startled throats. They wheeled. Some pawed at the ground with lowered heads swinging from side to side. One bolted. Another. Three or four in a bunch turned and shouldered their mad way through those behind. The movement became general.

In a couple of minutes the animals were off in a mad stampede—fleeing from the strange flames waving behind them. Thousands of hoofs pounded the frozen ground. The noise rose to a thunderous roar.

Some fell, and were immediately trampled to death. Nothing could stop them now. The sea of backs and horns rolled on, gathering momentum.

Gran saw Chichkin's span of deer still trying to force its way ahead, toward him. Mikheal, standing high on the sled, was swinging his whip madly. The avalanche of terrorized animals swept on, and he was directly in their path.

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Gran dropped his burning robe and shook the flaming mitts from his hands. Ericson stood with the charred remains of his *kulita* at his feet. Then Gran felt a hand on his arm. Vanya's eyes were wide as she watched the swiftly developing tragedy. Then, suddenly, she turned her back to the scene and buried her face in his shoulder. He put an arm around her and turned his own eyes away.

A PIERCING scream came from the sled now lost in the maelstrom of stampeding deer. There were a couple of futile, desperate shots as Mad Mikheal tried to stem the tide. Then the sound of the pounding hoofs dwindled as the maddened deer tore on back across the tundra.

They left strewn in the path behind them dead and dying animals, and in one place, the watchers saw two deer that were still in harness struggling feebly amid the remains of a splintered sled. Three still figures were stretched out in grotesque attitudes nearby.

Ericson walked slowly up to the spot, stood looking for a moment, and then came back to where Gran and Vanya stood. He shook his head as he came. One word was all that he spoke.

"Pulp!"

Gran nodded, and then took Vanya back and placed her on the sled. Ericson looked at the still figure of Barwell.

"You've got plenty of time to take care of this fellow now," he said. "Come on down to my cabin. With Mad Mikheal gone, it is a question if another party will come out looking for you. Not for a few days, anyway."

As they struck off for the trail that would take them down onto the beach, Gran called Ericson's attention to two figures far out on the tundra. They were moving here and there, stooping, and then moving on.

"My herders," explained the ex-whaler. "They are cutting the throats of the dead deer so that their flesh will be good for food."

"But how in the world did your men ever escape?" asked Gran.

Ericson smiled. "That isn't the first stampede those fellows have seen," he said. "As soon as it started, they felled a couple of deer with their knives and crouched down between the carcasses. It's an old stunt of theirs."

He looked at Gran with twinkling eyes. "I was afraid that Mad Mikheal might know that trick, too; but after my *kulita* accidentally caught on fire while I was lighting my pipe, I saw that he didn't."

Gran reached out and grasped Ericson's hand. He spoke no word of thanks. He knew now that the story of a stampede was written in the snow, to account for Chichkin's death to any who might inquire. No blame could attach to Ericson. He let the pressure of his grip tell the ex-whaler how he appreciated his timely aid and the sacrifices which he had made.

The threat made down there on the beach the day Ericson had been struck across the face with Mad Mikheal's whip had been carried out by the expatriated American. He had evened his score with Chichkin, the *ispravnik*.

CHAPTER XII.

SETTLEMENTS.

DUSK that evening found a busy room in Ericson's little boat-timber cabin.

His wife, as much a mother as though her skin had been white, fussed around dividing her time between the

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sick man on the bed and her four wide-eyed children, who had never dreamed that there was so much excitement in the world.

Hot stones were at Barwell's feet, and Vanya was feeding him hot broth from rich, red seal meat. Color had quickly returned to his cheeks, and his eyes had lost the dull, glassy look they had held when he had first opened them four hours before.

Mrs. Ericson was preparing supper for them all, and Vanya had turned her attention to Gran's wounded leg, when the ex-whaler came in.

"There were only a few over a hundred reindeer killed, that's all," he reported, "and I have six fine sled deer ready for you to take in the morning. You won't have to hurry from now on, you're safe as a church. Take your time, and you'll soon be passing through native settlements where you can get food."

He looked over at Barwell, saw the color in his face, and smiled. "That's all he needed," he said, "hot grub."

The young explorer held out a hand. "Ericson," he said slowly, "the folks have told me what you have done for them. When I came to—you were out looking after your deer, I guess—I was surprised to discover that I was on the beach, beside my wrecked boat. I hadn't known, of course, that we were anywhere near the scene of the wreck of the Search." He raised up on one elbow and motioned to Gran. "Parker," he said, "I think one of those sacks will perhaps pay this man for the deer he has lost and those which he is giving us to continue on with."

From a pile of twelve heavy hair seal bags beside the door, Gran took one and handed it to Ericson. The ex-whaler's mouth flew open when he felt the weight. He untied the leather string at the throat, and bright yellow gold glinted in the lamp light.

He asked twenty questions in as many seconds. Gran explained that it was the gold that Barwell and his companions had brought back from the newly found land. They had cached it in a cave when they were shoved up on the beach, and had only taken a small sack of it into Kolyma with them. Barwell, learning that he was back near the wreck, had directed Gran to get the sacks of gold which he had hidden away in the cave.

"That gold was enough to start plenty of trouble," offered the young explorer, "but what I'm most thankful for," he said, "is that I have been able to get back safely the notes on the natives of this land. I left those notes in the cave with the gold."

"It's a wonder you didn't find the gold," laughed Gran, turning to Ericson. "When Barwell told Vanya and me where it was, we had it back here to the house in twenty minutes."

"I've been too busy to do much exploring through these caves," Ericson grinned. "The only reason I paid any attention to the wreck was because I needed the timbers for my house." And then he protested taking the gold for what he had done. "Why," he said, "there must be close to ten thousand in this poke."

"And plenty more where it came from!" said Barwell. "You take it, or we don't take the deer."

He refused to argue or to cut the amount down, and at last he won.

EVERYTHING was in readiness for the start on the morrow, and Barwell was feeling a hundred per cent better when they sat down to dinner. Both he and Gran had made

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good use of Ericson's razor. They looked half respectable, for the first time in what to Gran seemed like ages. The hurried piling up of events, one on top of the other, since leaving Nome with the professor had hardly given him time to think. He looked across at the explorer, and told himself that he was glad the mission had proved successful.

"'. . . A promise made is a debt unpaid . . .'" he quoted.

Well, he had made good his promise to the professor. It was back to Nome now; and from the remarks made by Barwell that afternoon, it looked as though he'd be able to buy himself a couple of good planes and be able to start off in business properly.

He got up from the table and walked outside. The wind had died down, and the only sound now was the whispering of the ice on the sea-washed beach. A pale moon brushed everything with a soft silvery paint.

A step behind him. He turned. It was Vanya. She put an arm through his; and standing thus they stopped to watch the moonlight playing on the waves. Vanya pointed to the big platinum disc in the eastern sky.

"Just think, Gran," she said softly. "Soon we'll be over beneath that big moon—in Alaska—away from this mad place that was once my beloved Russia!"

"Yes," replied Gran, "we're safe now. We'll make it from here on without any trouble." He looked out into the east, over her head, refusing to meet her eyes, that he could feel searching his.

"I suppose you two will be going direct to the States," he said in a voice that had a note of forced casualness in it.

"*We two?*" Vanya stepped directly in front of him. "What do you mean? What two? You and I?"

Was that eagerness in her voice?

Still he couldn't trust himself to look into her eyes. "You and Barwell," he answered.

Vanya's tinkling laugh brought his eyes to hers. "Silly!" she chided. "William Barwell's engaged to some girl in San Francisco. When I first acted as interpreter for Chichkin, he asked me to please write her if anything happened to him. The *ispravnik* thought we were talking about the new land and the gold, while all the time Barwell was telling about this girl and begging me to get word to her."

"You aren't in love with him yourself then?" demanded Gran, grasping her by the shoulders. "You did all these things—?"

"Because I wanted to get away myself. And don't forget, Gran, Chichkin made me watch him whip you. I was afraid to attempt their release until I knew I could have you to help."

"And all the time I thought—"

Again Vanya laughed. "I know," she said. "Men of action are often blind. We Russian women try to hide our true feelings, but you should have been able to see that it wasn't William Barwell I loved. It was—"

She never finished the sentence. It was pressed back against her red lips.

The ice whispered in the surf at their feet; and far out on a floe a seal barked.

Gran released her from his arms. He held her off and looked at her, then brought her to him again.

"Vanya, dear, do you think you'd like to live in Alaska?"

"I've been planning on it," she laughed happily.

THE END.

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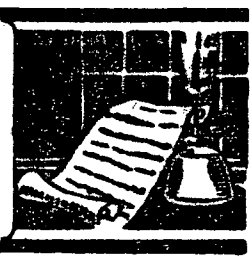

JUST OVER THE HORIZON

ACCORDING to the lookout, here are some landmarks dead ahead on ARGOSY'S cruise:

Robert Carse's crime and Prohibition novel, "King Mob," starts next week, along with novelettes by Theodore Roscoe and Foster-Harris.

Denis Burke, swordsman and pirate, returns Sept. 10 (Sept. 17 in Canada) in H. Bedford-Jones's novelette, "Buccaneer Blood." An old Western favorite, Eugene Cunningham, brings us a novelette, "Bravo Trail." And Lieut. John Hopper starts a three-part novel of enemy spies and swift Army intrigue in the Panama Canal Zone.

Edgar Rice Burroughs opens his fantastic novel of a new planet, "The Pirates of Venus," on Sept. 17. The novelette is a sea-going adventure by Ralph R. Perry.

"A Sultan of Java," by J. Allan Dunn, features the Sept. 24 issue, along with an Alaska novelette, "Gambler's Gold," by Jack Allman.

And October begins with a smashing novel of the old West in the Indian-fighting days, by J. E. Grinstead—"The Red Scalp." Also business crime and auto racing novelettes by Will McMorrow and Cliff Farrell.

BELIEVE it or not, life is funnier than fiction, down below the Border!

The opening incident of "Buckboard Tracks" (names of people and places changed, of course) actually happened in Mexico. The capture, the drunken general, the target practice, etc., were all written from an experience of a friend of mine. The general was as I have pictured him, as was the town. I was nearly in the same predicament, in the same town. I had the army lined up to receive me with loaded guns. But I had the luck of the Irish, too.

W. C. TUTTLE.

MORE true features? Well, Lowell Thomas returns next month, and will appear in every other issue:

High Point, N. C.

I read in the July 16 "Argonotes" what Mr. Greenfield said in regards to the true story by Lowell Thomas and "Men of Daring," by Stookie Allen.

Now I suppose we all buy the ARGOSY to read adventurous stories, so what do we get when we read Stookie Allen's feature but the true adventures of some of the greatest men and empire builders in the world?

Lowell Thomas is a world-wide known traveler and explorer and stories by him are worth any magazine's space, and anyone's time to read.

I do not wish the ARGOSY to put a lot of true features in it because it is a fiction magazine, but I do say that the two new true features of the type now running in the ARGOSY are, I think, one of the best improvements you have made in the ARGOSY.

As for the fiction stories I don't think they can be beat.

I would like to know when we will get a story with old *Bill Peepe* in it again, also *Jimmie Cordie* and *Denis Burke.*

JAMES W. BLACKWELL.

ONE of many letters received pointing out Lieut. Hopper's "boner" in "Ninth Inning Nerve":

Greenville, S. C.

I have been a reader of ARGOSY for nearly seven months and think it the best magazine out. I have enjoyed almost every story except Ray Cummings's "Insect Invasion" which was ter-

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rible, and "Temple of the Dogs," by H. Bedford-Jones which was the worst attempt at a story that I have ever read.

The stories that I have liked are too numerous to mention, but among the best were "The Golden Serpent," "The Dwellers in the Mirage," "Captain Renegade," "Tarzan and the City of Gold," "Red Emeralds," and "Timber War."

Now I have a brickbat to throw at Lieut. John Hopper after reading his "Ninth Inning Nerve." The story itself was O. K., but I would suggest that the author see a few games before writing another baseball story. Then he would probably observe that a man does not stand at the coaching "stripe" beyond third base *when his team is in the field*. The opponents should have had a man coaching there, especially as there were three men on base at the time.

The author should also know that when a ball game is won in the last half of the ninth inning, the game is over when the winning runs cross the plate regardless of how many are out. In the story a batter hit a home run in the last of the ninth winning the game 9 to 7. That should have ended the game, but the author had his pitcher strike out the next man for the final out.

Oh, well, probably that's the way they play in the Canal Zone. Or it could be just "The Old Army Game."

W. C. WALLS.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

Fill out coupons from 10 consecutive issues and get a large ARGOSY drawing. This coupon not good after Nov. 19, 1932.

8-27

Looking Ahead!

KING MOB

What would the repeal of Prohibition do to the underworld? Would it stop crime—or drive gangland to overthrow our country? Read this breathtaking novel of Crime's greatest battle with the Law.

By ROBERT CARSE

Two Novelettes

THE MUTINEER

An amazing Foreign Legion tale

By THEODORE ROSCOE

BURNING DEATH

A thrilling yarn of the oilfields

By FOSTER-HARRIS

COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—SEPTEMBER 3rd

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Read every word of this National Broadcast

THIS IS CARL E. MANDEL SPEAKING
PRESIDENT OF CARLTON MILLS INC. NEW YORK
MY COMPANY IS GIVING AWAY
SHIRTS · TIES · HOSE AND UNDERWEAR
AND OFFERS BIG PAY TO ITS REPRESENTATIVES
LISTEN TO EVERY WORD OF THIS IMPORTANT MESSAGE

BIG PAY Giving Away

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Join the Gold Rush

A Personal Message from C. E. MANDEL
President, CARLTON MILLS, Inc.

Man! You know that one tiny electric spark will set off dynamite sufficient to wreck a skyscraper building, and that each little invisible atom contains enough explosive energy, if released, to blow up a big city. In that same way you hold within yourself a mighty force waiting to be awakened by the greatest-of-all-time money making plan of merchandising ever given to the selling world—giving away absolutely FREE the Famous Carlton Garments.

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Imagine for the moment that you are one of my money making representatives. You offer three fine quality shirts at prices lower than fifteen years ago, the latest men's styles, fully guaranteed. *NOW LISTEN* carefully—here is why you are bound to clinch orders easily and quickly. You give your prospect one of these gorgeous shirts *absolutely FREE!* Think of it, man! Four garments for the price of three. It's simple order taking. (The FREE give-away does the SELLING FOR YOU.)

Read all about the big rewards offered for your efforts in the next column. They are indeed rewards worthy only of the finest men. A great contribution to the selling world. A merchandising plan that has built up bank accounts for our men. Yes sir! We grow oak trees where formerly acorns lay.

JOIN THE GOLD RUSH. Stop and think of the tremendous selling force one Carlton garment FREE with every three offers you. Why, man, it's a one call walk-away order every time—no turn downs. The garments are designed on Fifth Avenue, America's style center for finest quality men's apparel, priced lower than at any time in fifteen years. These are advantages over competition that's got 'em all stopped.

ORDERS and CASH Yours EASY

The FREE give-away has caught the fancy of millions of people. They love it, men! And come back for more. Big cash commissions on original and reorders, besides $25.00 weekly cash bonuses—easy to get; in addition, you automatically become a partner in this great business to the extent of 40% profit sharing. Money coming to you all the time.

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This wonderful order-getting Sample Outfit contains the newest creations in Fall Shirtings—Hosiery—Underwear—Neckwear—Sheeplined Coats and Leather outer-garments. Join the Carlton money makers—represent the industry's oldest, most reliable institution. *Get started at once!* MAIL IN THAT COUPON—Let Carlton show you an easy road to success.

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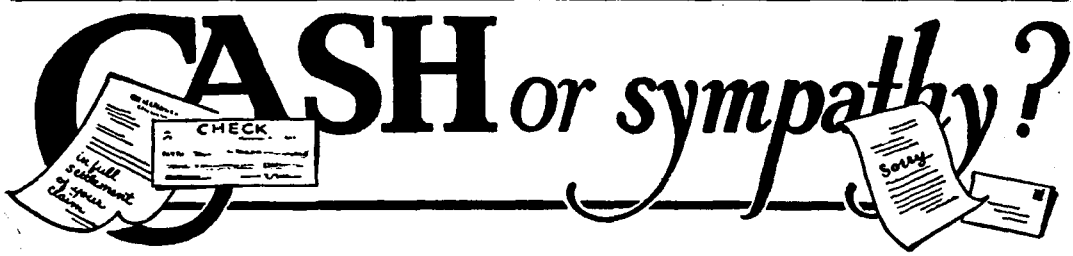
CASH or sympathy?



Which do you want?

Suppose you met with an accident or sickness tonight—salary stopped—which would you prefer

$25 Weekly . . . or Sympathy?

Which would you Pay?

Would you rather pay bills and household expenses out of a slim saving account or a . . .

Which will your family want?

In case of your accidental death, which would you rather give your family . . .

$10,000 Cash . . . or Sympathy?

$10 Bill

For a Whole Year's Protection Under a LIMITED COVERAGE

Accident and Sickness

POLICY

Get Cash instead of Sympathy. If you met with an accident in your home, on the street, or road, in the field, or on your job—will your income continue? Remember, few escape without accident—and none of us can tell what tomorrow holds for us. While you are reading this warning, somewhere some ghastly tragedy, some flood or fire, some automobile or train disaster, is taking its toll of human life or limb. Protect yourself now.

Get Cash instead of Sympathy.

If you suddenly became ill—would your income stop? What if you contracted lobar pneumonia, appendicitis operation, or any of the many common ills which are covered in this strong policy, wouldn't you rest easier and convalesce more quickly if you knew that our company stood ready to help lift from your shoulders, distressing financial burdens in case of a personal tragedy? Protect yourself now.

Get Cash instead of Sympathy.

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Mail the Coupon before it's too late to protect yourself against the chances of fate picking you out as its next victim.

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$10,000

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This is a simple and understandable policy—without complicated or misleading clauses. You know exactly what every word means—and every word means exactly what it says.

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